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ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER AT THE NEW YORK, N. Y., POST OFFICE.

December 15, 1897.

No. 999.

PUBLISHED EVERY
WEDNESDAY.

BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,
92 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

TEN CENTS A COPY.
\$5.00 A YEAR.

Vol. LXXVII.

The Velvet Hand; OR, The Iron Grip of Injun Dick.

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AUTHOR OF "OVERLAND KIT," "ROCKY MOUNTAIN ROB,"
"KENTUCK, THE SPORT," "INJUN DICK," ETC.

PROLOGUE.

NOT DEAD BUT SLEEPING.

DARK and gloomy were the clouds that lowered around great Shasta's snow-covered peak. The hour of midnight was near at hand, and the slow-rising moon, struggling in the embrace of the thick and envious clouds, barely lighted up the night.

On the north-western side of the peak, where one of the edges of the old crater had broken away, thus forming a small circular plateau about a hundred yards in diameter, a huge fire was brightly burning.

By the fire, and feeding the flames, stood a tall, dark form.

The copper-colored face, the massive features, as well as the forest-prairie garb of deerskin which he wore plainly told that the man was native to the soil.

Far below in the valley twinkled the lights of the mining town of Cinnabar, and in the main street of that young metropolis of the Shasta valley, a group of miners were gathered, eagerly trying, with the aid of a powerful glass, to discover the meaning of the unusual beacon blazing so brightly on the side of giant Shasta's peak.

"Some of the buck's heathen ceremonies!" the word went around, as, by the aid of the glass, the miners made out that the tall form standing by the burning pile was a savage chief.

Little did the men of Cinnabar dream that the blazing beacon was to serve as a funeral pyre for the mortal remains of the long-bearded Cherokee, the Injun Dick of "Overland Kit," the untiring pursuer of "Rocky Mountain Rob," the Richard Talbot, superintendent of the Cinnabar Mine, of "Kentuck," and the dreaded White Rider, the Death-Shot of Shasta, who made such fearful fight for the

Cinnabar lode, as detailed in the pages of "Injun Dick."

"Give my body to the flames on Shasta's side," the hero had muttered, after receiving the chance shot, his death-wound, seemingly.

And O-wa-to (Mud-turtle), the Blackfoot chief, who had traveled far from the home of his tribe, seeking the friend of his early days in the golden California land, promised to respect the injunction.

Then the stricken man had swooned away, and the Indian, bending anxiously over the still form, believed that death's dark angel had set his fatal signet upon the brow of lion-hearted Talbot.

Motionless by the side of the body, with his head muffled in his blanket after the fashion of his people when mourning for the loved and lost, the chief had remained until the midnight hour was at hand; then, to the top of Shasta's peak he bore the senseless form of the man who had been to him like a brother.

The funeral pyre was kindled, and as the flames roared and sparkled high in the air, the Indian knelt by the side of the form, now so cold and still, a last farewell to take.



A NICKEL-PLATED REVOLVER GLISTENED IN VELVET HAND'S WHITE FINGERS, AND NOT A MAN CARED TO TEST HIS MARKSMANSHIP.

The eyes of the chief were heavy with tears as he looked upon the face of the man he had loved so well. Even the stoic nature of the savage gave way before the grief of that sad hour.

And then, bending over, he took the helpless form within his arms.

A second only the Indian pressed the senseless figure against his own broad breast, and then with a wild start and a half-shriek, almost womanly in its nature, he placed the body again upon the cold earth, and glared with eager eyes upon the passive face.

Life was not yet extinct!

In some little corner of the manly frame the vital spark still lingered.

The random shot had struck fairly home, but so strong the constitution of iron-limbed Injun Dick that the potent lead, which would have carried death to almost any other mortal, had only produced a deathlike swoon.

The heart was beating feebly, and the savage chief, well gifted in the rude medical practice of his race, doubted not that he could save the stricken man.

The fight for the Cinnabar mine was not yet ended! Injun Dick Talbot lived, and while he breathed no mortal man might hope to possess the Cinnabar lode in peace. Again it would be war to the knife!

The eyes opened; the great dark eyes, as keen as the orbs of a wildcat, and yet at times as soft in their light and as lustrous as the star-gazers of a beautiful girl.

Slowly the life came back to the manly form, and then, as the red chief raised the head of the reviving man upon his knee, the eyes of Talbot fell upon the distant lights of Cinnabar.

"Again I pass from the shadows of the valley of death, and wake to life; Cinnabar, thy glories are mine, and mortal man shall not wrest them from me. By fair means or foul again I'll own the Cinnabar lode, and woe to the men who dare to stand between me and my prize!"

And the pale stars, glittering above, registered the oath.

CHAPTER I.

THE VELVET HAND.

AGAIN we write of the young metropolis of the Shasta valley, thriving Cinnabar City. We take up the recital of the fortunes of this celebrated town and its inhabitants just one year from the time when the beacon fire, blazing on the side of Shasta, had attracted the attention of the inhabitants.

And, during the year, Cinnabar had changed considerably. Many of the former inhabitants had departed, and fresh ones had taken their places.

The Cinnabar lode had been sold for taxes, and had been purchased for quite a small sum by a gentleman named Fernando del Colma, a native Californian, originally a cattle-raiser on the lower coast, near Los Angeles.

Del Colma was a man of thirty, apparently; a true Spanish-Mexican-American—a man of medium size, dark eyes, dark hair, pointed mustache and beard, complexion of tawny hue, little feet, little hands, almost effeminate in their character. A settled melancholy seemed to brood ever on his handsome, haughty features. Great contrast was he, every inch a gentleman, to the rude and uncultivated men by whom he was surrounded.

He was a true descendant of the old race—the cattle-breeding, pleasure-loving, proud, haughty, but gentlemanly lords of California, who held the land in vast tracts before the gold discoveries brought in the pushing, adventuring Anglo-Saxons.

There was nothing in common between the old race and the new men, and little by little the rancheros gave way to the gold-miners.

Fernando's father had been one of the largest landed proprietors on the lower coast, and, dying, had bequeathed to his two children, Fernando and his sister Blanche, a large fortune.

Fernando, careless and unthrifty, like all his race, had made sad havoc with his money, until at last the day of reckoning came, and the young man found that few of his father's broad acres remained unincumbered.

Pleasure must cease and work begin.

During his trips to San Francisco he had made the acquaintance of a dashing young fellow, who called himself Bertrand Redan, and this gentleman, who professed to be well acquainted with the upper mining country, had often advised Fernando to try his luck in a mining speculation.

So, upon discovering that something must be done to retrieve his impaired fortunes, Del Colma had turned all his property into ready cash, and acting upon Redan's advice, had bought the Cinnabar mine; and, as he knew very little about mining matters, Redan accepted the position of superintendent, and agreed to manage the whole affair.

A handsome, dashing-looking fellow was Redan, being rather tall in stature, well built, with black eyes and hair, which he wore long and curling, very white skin, and with a general air of refinement.

A pretty fair miner, too, as he quickly proved when he set the men to work to clear up the rubbish which had accumulated around the Cinnabar works, and proceeded to put the mine in working order.

An evil name the Cinnabar lode bore; too much blood and treasure had already been expended there, and the old residents of the town, who knew something of the mine in the old days, shook their heads sagely, and "reckoned" that no luck would come from meddling with the lode which had already cost one

Indian war, to say nothing of the officials of the town who had fallen by the desperate hand of the Death Shot of Shasta.

Some of these sayings had come to the ears of Del Colma, but he shrugged his shoulders with true Spanish indifference, and proceeded to erect a cottage just outside the Cinnabar property, a small, snug dwelling, and in looks superior to any other in town.

Cinnabar City was not particularly well supplied with women, and what there was, as a general rule, were rather weather-beaten and ugly. It was a matter, then, of little wonder that the arrival of Blanche del Colma excited a great deal of interest, for Blanche was a beauty. No fairer girl had ever stepped foot within the Shasta valley. She was strikingly like her brother; the same eyes, the same hair, and the same peculiar melancholy expression.

She was as sweet by nature as one of the juicy oranges of her own sunny clime, but as proud as though she had been born to a queen's estate.

Blanche del Colma had lived a month in Cinnabar, and yet no gentleman of the town could boast that he was a friend of the charming girl; very few indeed could lay claim to even a simple acquaintance.

Still she was no recluse; hardly a pleasant day but saw her in the saddle. She rode a spotted mustang, a creature of infinite beauty, as though she was born to the back of a steed.

But there was nothing in common between the fair Spanish-blooded girl and the gay young fellows of the town. She was not for them, nor they for her. In her sight they were rude, rough men, and she would have as soon thought of entertaining an affection for one of the half-blood herdsmen upon her father's estate as to allow her maiden fancy to be pleased with one of these sturdy men of Cinnabar.

Romantic by nature, she looked for a gallant lover, some stranger from beyond the seas, one of the old race, perchance, from whence her line had sprung.

Del Colma, like most native Californians, was a slave to some of the peculiar traits of his race. He was a hard drinker, deeply addicted to play, lacked the thrift and caution of the Anglo-Saxon, and was as careless with his money as though he still possessed the broad acres that his father once had owned near to the "city of the Angels," on the southern coast, and, naturally, his love for gambling, and for strong liquor, brought him often in contact with the young fellows of the town.

Therefore, when in company with the gay bucks of Cinnabar, he had encountered Blanche, common courtesy had compelled him to introduce his companions.

Small benefit, though, the introduction had been to the enamored youths. A cold bow and a scant "good-morning" were all that the Californian beauty vouchsafed in return for their elaborate salutations.

There was a small group of friends, generally found together after the toils of the day were done, and commonly termed by the miners the "Occidental gang," with whom Del Colma was quite intimate, and as the members of the "gang" were the leading men of the town, it was only natural that one and all, with one exception, should be ardent admirers of the fair senorita.

Clint MacAlpine, formerly postmaster, but now mayor of the city; John Rocks, usually termed "Sandy" Rocks, largely interested in the Queen City Mining Company of Angel's Bar, a thriving suburb of Cinnabar; "Judge" Bob Candy, the express-agent; Billy King, formerly the barkeeper, but now the thriving proprietor of the Occidental Hotel; Leo Pollock, the largest storekeeper in the town, were the principal members of the Occidental "gang," and with the Occidentals, too, was usually to be found one of the most noted characters of the city at the time of which we write. He was a man of thirty or thereabouts, a little above the medium size, with a strong, manly face, a well-knit figure, and a bearing which stamped him as a captain among captains. His face was always smoothly shaven, and he was as neat and careful in his dress as though he were a promenadeur fresh from the asphalt pavements of la belle Paris, rather than a denizen of one of the roughest little mining towns to be found in all California.

He dressed so oddly that, once seen, he was not apt to be forgotten. A complete suit of black velvet he wore; coat, vest, and pantaloons, the hat even, were of the same material, and his ruffled shirt-bosom, wherein gleamed two tiny diamond studs, was a miracle of art.

The best card-player in all Northern California this gentleman was reputed to be, and, clear from Yreka to Mount Shasta, he was known as "The Velvet Hand of Cinnabar."

Richard Velvet he called himself, and he had such a soft, "taking" way with him, as many a foolhardy miner, confident in his skill in card-playing, had found to his cost, and he was always so cool, so self-possessed, that it was not long before "Richard Velvet, that new sharp," became shortened to "Velvet Hand," and the gentleman in question rather liked the title, so that he got into the habit of giving his name as Velvet Hand. These little nicknames stick on the Pacific slope.

Many a skillful player of cards was there in the territory tributary to the lively city of Cinnabar, but not one of the tribe could win with the ease and grace of Velvet Hand.

A strange fact, too, about this quiet gentleman, and one which his companions had often noted and commented upon: he a lone of all the young men of the town seemed not to have fallen a victim to the charms of Blanche del Colma; he alone of all the Occidental gang had not secured an introduction to the dark-eyed beauty, and yet he was on more intimate terms with Fernando del Colma, her brother, than any other man in the town—Bertrand Redan, the superintendent of the Cinnabar works alone excepted.

Many a time the gray light of the morn had peeped in at the window of a little private room on the second floor of the Occidental Hotel to find the Californian and the Velvet Hand hard at play, with a week's production of the Cinnabar lode trembling in the balance; and seldom it was that Del Colma rose a winner from the table.

And when Mr. Dick Velvet was rallied about his avoidance of the glowing beauty, so rich in all her wondrous charms, and asked why, being so intimate with the brother, he had not tried to push his fortune with the sister—for the cool sport was as good-looking a gentleman as there was in the town—he would laughingly reply that women were “bad medicine” to him, and that as long as he depended upon card-playing to keep ahead of the world he would give the softer sex a wide berth.

Thus matters stood in the year 187—, when we again take up the pen to chronicle the doings of the men of Cinnabar.

CHAPTER II

THE BAND OF CAPTAIN DEATH.

THREE miles from Cinnabar City the Shasta river cut its way through the McCloud canyon. Dark and deep was the defile—as lonely a spot as could be found within a dozen miles of the mining settlement.

At the upper end of the canyon this defile widened out into a small rocky valley, through which ran the old Indian trail leading from Cinnabar up the river.

Along the trail, in the dusk of the evening, a horseman was riding. He was well mounted, well armed, and seemed familiar with the road, for he pushed straight onward without hesitation.

When he reached the open valley above the McCloud canyon, he halted for a moment, cast a careful glance around him as if suspicious of observation, then spurred his horse over the steep rocks until he reached the side of the rocky wall. There he dismounted. Drawing a black mask from his pocket, he covered his face with it. This done, he pushed his way through a dense clump of bushes, leading his horse by the bridle, and disappeared, apparently having made his way right into the solid rock; but if the clump of bushes had been removed, the mouth of a cave—a narrow cleft, just wide enough to allow the entrance of a horse—would have been visible.

Within the narrow passage all was dark as Egypt, but the masked man proceeded without hesitation, apparently familiar with the road, until a winding in the passage suddenly brought him into a vaulted chamber in the rock; thirty feet at least in diameter it was.

Within the apartment, the roof of which extended cone-shaped up into the rock, evidently having an outlet above, were two other horses—two other men.

The horses were quietly munching their oats in some rude stalls constructed at the further end of the apartment.

The men, roughly dressed, miner fashion, and also hiding their faces behind black masks, were seated upon some buffalo-ropes, seemingly waiting for the arrival of the new-comer.

A couple of lanterns suspended from spikes driven into the walls afforded light.

The moment the horseman released his grasp on the bridle, the animal hastened to join the other two, thus plainly proving that he was no stranger to the cavern and its mysteries.

And this secret chamber in the heart of the hill was the mountain home of the daring and bloody road-agent known far and wide in the Shasta valley as Captain Death.

And who was Captain Death?

Ah! that was a question that often had been put but as yet had not been answered.

About a year before the time of which we write Captain Death had first made his appearance in the Shasta valley.

A stage-coach, northward bound for Yreka, had been halted in a gloomy defile, seven or eight miles from the city of Cinnabar, and robbed of its express matter.

A single man had done the job. The driver, perceiving that the road-agent was alone, had attempted—contrary to the general habit of his class—to offer resistance, but had been promptly tumbled off his box by a well-directed shot fired by the outlaw.

The frightened passengers, four in number, had fled from the hack in hot haste at the driver's downfall, never offering a sign of resistance; then the “gentleman of the road” had coolly proceeded to appropriate the valuables. This finished he had addressed a few words to the disabled driver, who lay groaning on the ground, cursing the evil star which led him to offer resistance to the bird of prey.

“My name is Captain Death,” he said, in a coarse, evidently disguised voice. “I’m going to run this hyer trail for a time and I want the folks hereabouts to understand that I mean business, every time! If they knuckle down and let me go through ‘em, all right! If they don’t, then look out for sudden death.”

With this the bird of prey coolly rode off.

Of course Wells and Fargo, the owners of the stage line, were not going to stand any of this nonsense; therefore, they went for Captain Death lively, but little good it did them, too; not a single trace of the desperado could they discover!

After a time the search was given up, as the road-agent was supposed to have been driven off by the urgent chase; but, just as every body had come to the conclusion that they wouldn’t hear any more of the bold rider, another coach going north was attacked, and this time Captain Death had two companions.

A desperate resistance was offered by one of the passengers, an old man, who carried a small fortune on his person, and who was accompanied by his daughter. All fled from the hack but he, fierce at the prospect of losing his gold.

Captain Death called upon him to surrender; he refused, when, without more ado, the road-agents opened fire upon the coach, mortally wounding at the first discharge both the old man and his daughter, but, although staining their souls with this terrible crime, the outlaws did not secure the prize they were in search of, for the up coach from Yreka happening to approach just at that moment, compelled the rascals to retreat in hot haste.

This bloody deed created a terrible excitement; and for a time the road-agents disappeared, but when the excitement cooled down again they haunted the road.

The name of Captain Death became as well known along the trail as the express line itself, but so cunningly did he manage that never by any chance did one of the many expeditions in pursuit of him ever get fairly upon his trail.

That Captain Death was well posted as to the designs of his pursuers was evident; he had “friends at court” and they gave him timely warning when danger threatened him.

The two road-agents nodded to their chief when he appeared, for the solitary horseman was the notorious Captain Death, in person. He took a seat on one of the buffalo-ropes, lighted a cigarette, commenced smoking as he looked, inquiringly, upon his followers.

“Any news?” he asked.

“Not any,” responded the road-agent on the right, a tall, broad-shouldered fellow who was known as No. 1.

Captain Death had organized his band in a peculiar manner. The faith of man he distrusted, and therefore neither one of his companions knew who he was, or had ever seen him without his mask. He had picked his two men, had approached them at night, disguised, and enrolled them, neither one knowing the other.

“For our own safety,” as he had explained, “it is best we should be as strangers to each other. Then if one is taken he cannot denounce his companions.”

And so, with covered faces, the outlaws always met. Names were never mentioned. The leader was addressed as captain, the first road-agent, the burly fellow, as No. 1, the second, a thin, tall individual, as No. 2.

“Nothing stirring, eh?”

“Nothin’ that I hear of,” replied No. 2, with a strong nasal accent.

“It is some time since we made a raise.”

“Yes,” responded No. 1, with a melancholy shake of the head.

“Dry as dust an’ nothin’ to keep the jints limber.”

“Bout time we struck a rifle, somewhar I calc’late!” No. 2 suggested.

“I’ve got a big job on hand, boys,” Captain Death said; “no road-agent business this time, but something that will pay us better. You know the Cinnabar mine?”

Both of the men nodded.

“That’s our mutton!”

The two men shook their heads; they did not understand.

“The mine is a rich one.”

“Tain’t payin’ much yet,” No. 1, observed.

“That is because it has not yet got fairly to work, but it will pay, though. A friend of mine wants it, but as it would take twenty-five or thirty thousand dollars to buy it he proposes that we shall get it for him, which we can at a less figure. Fernando del Colma is at the end of his rope; all the money he has is in the mine; there’s a mortgage of ten thousand dollars due on it next week. He hopes to push that mortgage off for a month and in the mean time get out ore enough to meet it. Now we must raise blazes generally; damage the machinery, get the hands on a strike, stop work by any means so that the place will have to be sold by the sheriff, then my friend will pay two or three thousand dollars for the services we render in the matter.”

“Hol’ on!” cried No. 1, suddenly. “Is your friend named Injun Dick Talbot?”

“Injun Dick Talbot,” said Captain Death, slowly; “what do you mean?”

“Why, that, if it isn’t Injun Dick he mought as well hang up his fiddle!” No. 1 replied. “Tell you what it is, Cap, I know a heap ‘bout this hyer town! That air Cinnabar mine belongs to Injun Dick, the Death Shot of the Shasta as he’s been called! It’s an onlucky consarn; I’ve bin expectin’ to see Dick pop in and bu’st it up as he allers has done afore.”

“I never heard of him,” Captain Death said, dryly, “and I reckon that he won’t trouble my scheme any.”

“That Velvet Hand is tryin’ to bu’st the Cinnabar consarn as fast as he kin,” No. 2 remarked, abruptly. “I heered last night that he winned a thousand dollars from Del Colma in a single settin’.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised; but now to business; remember! Do all that is in your power to stop the mine from working. If we can fetch Del Colma into the hands of the sheriff it will be a couple of thousand dollars in our pockets. We must let the stages alone for awhile, for the pursuit is still hot, and in the mean time can amuse ourselves with this little game. The third night hence we will meet here again.”

“Say, Cap,” cried No. 1, abruptly, “wouldn’t it be a good idea to go for this Velvet Hand? I reckon that he would pan out right lively ef we got him up hyer onc’t.”

“That is worth thinking of,” Captain Death replied, rising; “and now, boys, be careful how you approach the cave, for if our hiding-place was once discovered it would be all up with us.”

And then the three separated, each one to make his way back to Cinnabar, by different roads.

The plot against Del Colma was working.

CHAPTER III.

THE GAMESTERS.

THE first gray streaks of the coming moon, lining the eastern skies and heralding the approach of the sun-god, peeped in at the window of a small, plainly furnished room, situated in the second story of the Occidental Hotel.

Within the room, a table between them, were seated two men, busily engaged at cards. The floor was strewn with crumpled cards; 'tis the losing gamester's whim to try a fresh pack every now and then in order to woo the fickle dame, Fortune.

That the two men had been at their game all night long was evident, for the candles were burning low, and the bed in one corner of the apartment had not been used.

The two men were quite a contrast to each other; the first, a good specimen of the Anglo-Saxon race, the second bearing the impress of the old Spanish line in every feature.

A single glance at the first—the winner evidently, for he was cool and unruffled, and as clear of eye as if he had not spent the lifelong night at the card-table—and from his peculiar garb he is easily recognized as the Velvet Hand of Cinnabar.

And the second, too, so strongly marked in feature, quite fit to sit for the portrait of Hernando Cortez, the conqueror of Mexico, was the man arrayed in the olden garb; no trouble to recognize in him the Californian, Fernando del Colma, the owner of the Cinnabar mine.

The players are ciphering up the results of the game.

"Five hundred dollars I owe you," Colma said, with a gloomy brow. "The fiend take the cards! Will my luck never change?"

"I'm afraid not, senor," the winner replied; "not until you change your style of playing."

The observation irritated the Californian.

"Am I not as good a player then as you?" he exclaimed, loftily, a true Spaniard in his arrogant way.

"No, not as good," Velvet Hand replied, coolly.

"And why not? It is the cards that favor you; when my hand is good, you hold a better!"

"Oh, no, only I know the value of hands better than you do, and I keep my temper. I play for amusement, you for money."

The Californian rose to his feet indignantly.

"You forget yourself, senor!" he exclaimed, mortally offended, reaching for his cloak and beginning to drop it around him in the picturesque Mexican fashion. "I am a gentleman of birth and fortune! Gold! I was born to it, and to me it is so much dross, while you—" he hesitated.

The Velvet Hand, busy now in trimming his nails with a little pearl-handled knife, laughed outright.

"Let me finish the sentence for you, senor," he said. "I am a gambler, a man who lives by card-playing. No social match for you, senor. You are an honest gentleman, the proprietor of the richest mine in the town, and yet you curse your evil fortune when luck goes against you and you lose a few hundred dollars. I, on the contrary, am a social pariah with not a friend on earth, and yet I lose my money with a smile and laugh at the decrees of fortune."

"Forgive me, senor!" Del Colma exclaimed, hastily, his generous nature touched by the frank coolness of the other. "I did not mean to wound you. I do lose my temper and play badly; I confess it! I am not a man of ice; it is not the money I care for, but the losing—that is what galls me! You have won from me five thousand dollars since we commenced playing two weeks ago and I can ill spare the money."

"Why play then?" was the natural question.

"I cannot help it!" cried the Californian, desperately. "There is a fiend within me that craves the excitement."

"It's lucky for you that you have got the Cinnabar mine to back you," the other said, carelessly. "By the by, you're doing very well, ain't you?"

"No, not yet."

"It's a rich mine."

"Yes; but we have hardly got the machinery in working order."

"By the way, senor, you and I have got to be pretty intimate, considering that you are the owner of one of the richest properties in the town, and that I am only a poor devil of a card-sharp, and so I'm going to make bold to give you a point or two, for I've had a good deal of experience in mining; that is, if you are willing to receive the advice in the same spirit in which it is given."

"I shall be honored, senor," Del Colma replied, with a stately bow.

"I took a look at the works this afternoon. I knew the mine in the old time, and I had a sort of curiosity to see how the place appeared." The wisest head could not have guessed from the cool way in which the man spoke, of the terrible flood of bitter recollections which the Cinnabar mine recalled to his mind. "The machinery you are using is not exactly the right sort, and you've got the toughest set of hands there that I think I ever saw, and your superintendent—Bertrand Redan, do you call him?" The Californian nodded. "Have you perfect faith in him?"

"As in my brother!" Del Colma replied, with true Spanish warmth.

"Ah, that's lucky; he has full charge of everything, I presume?"

"Yes, of everything."

"A man that you can trust is invaluable," the cool sharp observed, carelessly.

The Californian, open and generous-hearted by nature, took Velvet Hand's doubtful words as a compliment to his superintendent.

"Yes, he is invaluable, and yet my sister does not trust him," he remarked, slowly.

"Not" the American was surprised; "women have keen instincts sometimes."

"She does not like him. I am astonished, for he is a fine, noble fellow, and I fear he cared more for my haughty sister than he should," and then the don suddenly checked himself; he was not wont to speak so openly of the lovely Blanche, dearer to him than the apple of his eye. "The amount I owe you I have not with me—"

"Your word is quite sufficient," Velvet Hand replied, carelessly.

The Californian hesitated; it was evident that he disliked to remain a debtor.

"Stay!" he exclaimed, abruptly, drawing a diamond ring from his little finger and placing it upon the table; "take this as security for the sum."

The other shook his head.

"I would rather not."

"Nay, I insist! life is uncertain; I may die before I pay the debt."

"Don't let that trouble you; I should consider the account settled."

"Pray oblige me!"

The senor was thoroughly in earnest, and as the easiest way to settle the matter, Velvet Hand placed the ring upon his little finger.

"The sun is rising," the Californian remarked, approaching the window, and as he did so he caught sight of his sister riding past, mounted upon her spotted mustang.

Hardly had the sound of her horse's hoofs died away in the distance when a fearful uproar arose on the air, and from the door of a low saloon, opposite the hotel, came forth a motley gang, bearing a Chinaman in their midst.

Harder characters than were in the crowd could not be found within the territory of Cinnabar.

There was Yuba Bill, one of the recognized bullies of the town; Joe Bowers, the fat and greasy bummer; Doc Slater, the smartest horse-thief north of Frisco; Col. Tom Pipkin, as arrant a knave as ever dwelt within a white jail, and half a dozen other scamps equally as bad.

The crowd slung a rope over the limb of a convenient tree, adjusted a noose around the neck of the trembling, crying almond-eyed son of the East, from whose flowing sleeves sundry "face" cards were dropping, and prepared to swing him up.

"By Jove!" cried the card-sharp, throwing up the window-sash; "it's Hop-Ling-Ki, and he's the only man in town that can do up my ruffled shirts! They mustn't hang him, or I'm dished!"

Out of the window then, nimble as a monkey, went Velvet Hand, while the Californian rushed down the stairway.

CHAPTER IV.

DICK TAKES A HAND IN THE FUN.

"STRING up the durned heathen!" yelled Yuba Bill, adjusting the noose round the neck of the affrighted Chinaman.

"Oh, lemme kick the sawdust outen him first, me lord dook!" cried Bowers, who was nothing if not theatrical.

"Go easy, gents!" exclaimed Doc Slater, who headed the crowd gathered round the end of the rope, ready to run the unfortunate heathen up to the tree-branch. "Just give us the word when you are ready, and we'll fix the critter! We'll teach him to play roots on us free white men, the durned saffron-colored son of Confucious!" Doc was a scholar, if he was the cutest horse-thief that had ever escaped the hands of the Vigilantes.

"Me alle same Melican man; no hobbe, how can!" sputtered the celestial.

"Shut up yer yaup!" yelled sweet William Yuba, in the same dulcet strains with which he was wont, when on a "tare," and taking possession of the street, to proclaim that he was monarch of all he surveyed, which he generally was until some quiet miner got tired of his "foolin'," and sailed into him with a club, thereby producing order in Warsaw.

"Oh! men and brothers, has it come to this that we air agwines to be ruined by Chinese cheap labor?" howled Bowers, wildly; "and he held three aces, which was an immoral possibility, 'cos I had two on 'em up my own sleeve myself, an' the moment the heathen showed his hand, three aces, an' claimed the pile, I sed, 'thar's been cheatin' 'round this hyer board!'"

"All ready?" cried Yuba.

"Ye ho! and up he goes!" responded the Doc, and he and his gang began to pull on the rope, when the sudden and unexpected arrival of Velvet Hand interrupted the proceedings.

"Hallo! what's the matter?" he cried.

"Mind yer own business!" replied Yuba, savagely, and in supreme contempt; and as for Joe Bowers, who had only arrived in Cinnabar during the preceding night, he stared with open mouth at the velvet sport.

"Go 'long, an' don't interrupt the fun!" was Doc Slater's suggestion.

"This ain't any of *your* funeral!" Colonel Tom Pipkin ejaculated, loftily.

"None of my business, eh?" cried Velvet Hand, taking a couple of strides toward the fellows who had hold of the rope.

"No, sir-ee!" Doc responded, and he let go of the rope to feel for his six-shooter.

But before he could get his hand on the weapon, the sport had throat, and the unceremonious manner in which he wound horse-thief over his head and tumbled him

to the ground, completely demoralized, took all notion of fight out of the crowd. It was plainly evident that the velvet sport knew how to handle himself.

And, with the letting go of the rope, down came the celestial all in a heap.

A nickel-plated revolver glistened in Velvet Hand's white fingers, and not a man in the crowd cared to test the marksmanship of the sharp.

"This is the only washee-washee in the town that can do up a shirt fit for a gentleman to wear, and I'm not going to stand by and see him abused! Now what is the trouble?" Dick Velvet cried.

"Pardner, lemme explain!" Joe Bowers replied, with becoming dignity. "This hyer yaller cuss, fat an' ugly, has a-bin a-playin' it on us. He kem with the washin', he did, for the noble ladies that reside in yonder doocal mansion," and Bowers pointed to the shanty from whence the crowd had emerged, the celebrated Break o' Day saloon, notoriously the worst place of the kind in the town. "The John had the rocks; wid me own two lookin' eyes I see'd 'em! We invited him fur to tackle us with the yards. Game, he sed, he did not understand; but we, like men an' brothers, offered fur to teach the poor heathen. He was a stranger, an' we were ready to take him in, but we slipped up on it; he took us in, he did! He flaxed us right outen our boots; he won our ducats—four dollars an' a half of mine he corraled, an' then all on us went in to get hunk. We put up a job on him—Yuba carbined the kings, I yanked two aces, the Doc got the jacks, Col. Pipkin salivated the queens; we got him whar his ha'r was short, an' we slung out our pile an' went for him lively; and what was the result? I weep when I think of it! He saw us every time, an' arter all our shakels were up, we called for a sight, and he had thase aces and two kings! Whar is our boasted civilization of sich things kin be, an' overcome us like a summer cloud without our special wonder! We went fur him! W'at we couldn't get by cunning we took by force; an' then we calc'lated to swing him up, jes' fur greens, but you hev played a full hand on us, an' raked the pile."

"Boys, I wouldn't interfere with your fun for the world," Dick replied, perfectly serious, "but put yourself in my place. This John is the only man in town who can do up a ruffled shirt. If you hang him, where is my washee-washee to come from, eh?" The crowd shook their heads; the question was a conundrum, and they gave it up.

"Now, I'll tell you what I'll do, boys; call it square on the heathen—you've cleaned him out, anyway—and I'll stand two rounds of drinks at the Occidental bar!"

"Bully for you!" cried Bowers, joyfully; "that's a heap sight better nor hangin' the John!"

The majority of the crowd agreed with the bumper; but the Doc, who had been so roughly handled, Yuba Bill and Col. Pipkin objected.

"No, no!" Bill cried, doggedly; "we're going to hang the heathen."

"Yes, of course," Doc added.

"Certainly!" the colonel assented.

"You are not going to hang him!" and Velvet Hand spoke firmly, as with a single motion he threw the noose from the Chinaman's neck. "Scout!"

Hop-Ling-Ki did not wait for a second bidding, but sped away up the street as fleetly, almost, as a grayhound.

And not one of the crowd dared to follow him, no matter how great the desire, as long as the velvet sport was to the fore, the revolver gleaming in his hands.

The heathen disappeared around the corner of a shanty, and then the preserver turned to the three men, who stood, scowling, together.

"Now, gentlemen, if I've trod on any of your toes, I'm ready to give you all the satisfaction that you may require. Don't be bashful about speaking. I'll take you one at a time or two together, or three, or I'll fight the whole crowd at once!"

"Hol' on, me noble dook!" cried Bowers, impressively, "this ain't any of my funeral. You acted bally, and it does me proud to say so! Say, sport, if these aged eyes do not deceive me, I hav' seen you somewhar afore; your name is—?"

"Oh, I don't think you ever saw me anywhere!" Dick replied, carelessly.

"Oh, yes, I hev; and I knows you—knows you like a book, me noble count! You kin run this town, ef you want to fur all me."

The three discontented men had taken advantage of this diversion to sneak off; not a man of them cared to measure strength with the cool and plucky Velvet Hand.

The rest of the crowd adjourned to the hotel to accept the proffered hospitality of Dick, and as he followed the crowd into the Occidental, first bidding the stately Californian adieu, he happened to glance down the street and there beheld Blanche del Colma, half concealed behind a shanty. She was still on horseback, and it was plain that she had been attracted by the noise of the hanging match, and had witnessed the whole affair.

"Gambler and bully combined! A nice opinion she will have of me!" Dick muttered.

CHAPTER V.

BUCK OF ANGELS.

As Velvet Hand entered the hotel he encountered a stranger in the entry; a tall, brawny-built fellow, roughly dressed, miner-fashion. There was just about light enough in the passageway to enable him to discover this much in regard to the man, and that was all.

"Say, stranger, where kin I find a doctor round?" asked the man, hastily. "My partner has jest been h'isted over his horse's head down yonder, an' I'm mightily skeered lest his durned neck's broken; leastway, I 'spect he's pretty badly hurt. Mebbe you might be willing to give a feller a lift with him up as far as the hotel."

"Certainly," answered the sharp, readily; "where is he?"

"Oh, a leetle piece down the road. We were a-comin' up from Angels, an' my partner had bin a-h'istin' in more p'ison than he oughter, an' he rode his mule—like a durned galoot—right over a bowlder, an' the brute jest r'ared up, an' then he pitched t'other end skyward an' sent my partner outen his saddle like a blamed old sky-rocket, an' if his neck ain't busted it will jest be a wonder!"

"Go ahead; we'll fetch him up to the hotel, and I guess I can scare up a doctor round the town somewhere."

The man led the way straight through the hotel to the back door and out into the street, while Velvet Hand followed, close behind.

"He's right down thar, jest round the bend, ahind them air bushes," the fellow explained, as he hurried along the road.

And now that Velvet Hand got a good view of the man's face, he saw—as he had thought—that he was a total stranger to him. He was not a particularly good-looking chap, and if the Cinnabar man had chanced to meet him alone on a dark road and at a dark hour, he certainly would have given him a wide berth and had his weapons handy.

"I'm from Angels, I am," the stranger informed his volunteer nurse; "Joe Smith of Angels, an' my pardner's Dave Buck. Mebbe you've heern tell on Dave! He's jest the finest card-sharp in Northern Californy."

"No, I never heard of him," Velvet Hand replied, but "by his mind's eye, Horatio," he determined that if Mr. David Buck's neck had not been dislocated by his unpremeditated downfall—and gentle Providence generally protects the helpless devotees of jolly Bacchus—he would speedily ascertain by what right the man from Angels held such a reputation.

As the twain hurried round the bend in the road their ears were saluted with a strange discord of groans and curses.

It was very evident that Buck of Angels was still in the land of the living.

The man was lying on his side in a little clump of bushes which had plainly broken his fall and saved him from serious damage.

"Whar air ye, ye durned ole Joe Smith?" he howled. "Air ye goin' to leave me hyer fur to die like a spavined mule, eh?"

"Hyar I am, Dave!" answered his partner, hurrying up to him; "an' this hyer gent has been kind enough fur to come all the way from the Occidental fur to help you. Whar are ye hurt?"

"All over," growled the prostrate man. "Blame my eyes! ef I think that I've got a whole bone left in my body. Ef you air ary friend of mine, jes' cuss that blamed mule till you're black in the face."

"Do you think that you can walk?" asked Velvet Hand, approaching the prostrate man and kneeling down by his side. The Cinnabar sport quickly decided that the "pride of Angels" was more frightened than hurt, and that the strong liquor, so noted a product of the "Bar," which Mr. Buck evidently had been largely imbibing, had more to do with his inability to walk than any shock he had received by his fall.

"As quiet a mule as I ever see'd, too!" Joe Smith explained, and in truth the gray beast, grazing peacefully by the roadside, seemed gentleness itself.

"Wa-al, stranger, ef you would be so kind as to g'in me a bit of a lift, mebbe I could walk a leetle," Buck admitted.

"Certainly."

Velvet Hand, bending over the fellow, took hold of him under the arms, while Buck grasped the Cinnabar man's shoulders, grunting with pain as he moved.

Velvet Hand half raised the fellow from the ground, Buck got a fair hold with his feet on the earth, and then, suddenly exerting his strength, gave a twist that tossed the Cinnabar man—who was totally unprepared for such a thing—over on his back.

And the moment that Velvet Hand's shoulders fairly touched the ground, the other fellow sprang upon him.

Then out from the clump of bushes came a third man, who also assailed the prostrate man.

Crushed to earth, despite his struggles, the three men, with stout lariats evidently provided for the emergency, bound Velvet Hand securely, first dextrously muffling his head in a thick Mexican scarf, to make any alarm impossible.

But the cool and acute sharp had never for a moment thought of crying out for help. Accustomed to wholly depend upon himself, to call for assistance was foreign to his nature.

The moment that the Cinnabar man was fairly on his back the truth flashed upon him—he had been entrapped. Buck of Angels was a fraud.

Why they had selected Velvet Hand he was at a loss to guess. What foe in the Shasta land was bold enough for such a plan of vengeance?

His assailants were taking particular care not to harm him. They had trussed him hand and foot, like a turkey ready for the roasting. If his life was sought, one good blow would have settled the matter.

Once securely bound, the assailants lifted him carefully from the ground; Buck of Angels mounted the gray mule; Velvet Hand was seated on the saddle before him, the other ruffians taking care to lash him securely to their companion, and then off they set.

The eyes of the surprised man were securely bandaged, but his hearing was not impaired, and therefore he was somewhat surprised to note that no words were exchanged between the three

strangers during or after the attack. Evidently the scheme had been carefully planned in advance in all its details, but what was its meaning?

Onward the party went at a rapid pace, turning aside from the main trail a short distance on and striking into a "blind" path which wound through the shrubbery, running almost parallel with the road, but about a quarter of a mile south of it.

For thirty minutes at least the party proceeded on their way, and the captured man readily understood that he was being conveyed to some secure retreat; but, being as familiar with all the Shasta region as any native red brave, he did not doubt that when the bandage was removed from his eyes he would be able to recognize the locality to which he had been conveyed.

Velvet Hand could hear the rustling of the pine needles as the party forced their way through the narrow passage, the trail of the night beasts of prey, and then easily distinguished the difference when the hoofs of the mule trod on the uncovered lava rock, and then, when the air grew thick around him, and he missed the breath of the free winds, he guessed that he had been conveyed into some mountain cavern.

CHAPTER VI.

A FEARFUL ALTERNATIVE.

THE beast was halted, the prisoner removed from his back and seated upon a soft couch; then the scarf was taken from his head—and once again Velvet Hand was permitted to enjoy the privilege of his eyesight.

He looked around him. As he had anticipated he was in a cavern deep in the bosom of the mountain.

A few tallow candles, stuck in crevices in the walls, dimly lighted up the scene.

Three men beside himself were in the apartment, and each and every one of the three had carefully hidden his face under a black mask.

The road-agents—for the Cinnabar man guessed they were such—were all armed—in fact, fairly bristled with weapons.

Through their black masks their gleaming eyes shone, and Velvet Hand fancied that they all looked threateningly upon him.

The road-agents were seated upon elevated seats covered with buffalo-ropes while the captive had been placed upon a skin couch upon the floor, so that the three looked down like judges in council.

"You are the Cinnabar sharp called Velvet Hand?" the tallest road-agent said; he sat in the center and seemed to be the chief of the three. He was the one who had been concealed in the bushes and whose face the captive had not seen.

Velvet Hand looked inquiringly upon the gleaming eyes, shining through the holes in the black mask when the man spoke; it might be only fancy, yet the prisoner would have sworn that the owner of the voice was no stranger to him.

"Richard Velvet is my name, and I am sometimes called Velvet Hand," the prisoner answered.

"Well, we have taken considerable pains to secure an interview with you."

"I should suppose so," Velvet Hand dryly retorted.

"We have long desired to make your acquaintance."

"Indeed?"

"And as we deemed it improbable that you would accept an invitation to visit us in our mountain home, we took measures to compel you to come."

"The game is yours; I pass," Velvet Hand answered, in short parlance.

"Probably you are a little mixed as to why we have taken all this trouble?"

"Quite correct."

"We were anxious to make your acquaintance; and had an idea we might be mutually useful to each other."

"No *sub*," responded the sharp, tersely.

"You don't understand?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know who we are?"

"Well, I think I can guess."

"We are men of liberal ideas; there is altogether too much inequality in this world; some men have too much money, others not enough; we propose to strike a balance."

"At the muzzle of a revolver, eh?"

"Correct!"

"Or the point of a bowie-knife, we ain't 'ticular to a shade" put in the road-agent on the right, and in his hoarse tones the Cinnabar sharp recognized the voice of Buck of Angels.

"And as you are a man who does business something after our fashion, we didn't know but what you might feel inclined to join teams with us. I am Captain Death, and these are the road-agents of Shasta. We own all the roads south of Yreka, and we intend to collect toll from everybody that travels over them, provided the pilgrims are well fixed and ain't too hefty on the light."

Velvet Hand nodded to signify that he understood, and the longer he listened to the voice of the road-agent the more he became convinced that Captain Death was no stranger to the Occidental Hotel and the streets of Cinnabar.

"Come, Velvet Hand, you are the very man we want," Captain Death continued. "We want one more in our band, and you are the very man to fill the bill. I'm told that you are not afraid of man or devil, that you are as good a pistol-shot as there is in the Shasta valley, and as you rob men now at cards, why, it will be right as your line to change the 'papers' for the revolver."

"I beg your pardon!" cried Velvet Hand, shortly, "but you have made a slight mistake," and there was a gleam of anger in his dark eyes as he spoke. "I have never robbed anybody yet at cards; I try to play as fair a game as I know now, unless I get in with a lot of thieves, and then if they try to cheat me it is only fair, I take it, to turn the tables upon them."

"Oh, yes, I understand all about that!" Captain Death exclaimed, abruptly. "I never knew a gambler yet that didn't play on the square. Men of your trade are not as honest as we road-agents. We own up to skinning our game when you cry honesty, but it's all a matter of words, and we won't quarrel about it. What do you say now? Will you join the band of Captain Death?"

"What are the inducements?" Velvet Hand asked, in his quiet way.

"All booty will be divided into five parts; one share to each of the band and two to the captain. The captain—myself—to plan the jobs and receive unqualified obedience from the members of the band."

"That is I must obey any order that you may give whether it suits me or not."

"Exactly."

"And who guarantees me against being shot by the troops, or a well-heeled passenger, or from being hung by some vigilance committee?" Velvet Hand demanded.

The road-agents looked at each other, and then Captain Death burst into a hoarse laugh.

"Oho, my fine fellow, you must take your chances on that."

"I reckon I won't chip in!" Velvet Hand retorted. "I'm not used to following any man's lead but my own, and, least of all, going it blind. I'm very much obliged for your flattering offer, and when your time comes to be hung I'll travel a hundred miles to say good-by to any one of you."

The road-agents glared ominously at the bold speaker.

"This is your final decision?" demanded Captain Death, angrily.

"You can bet all your rocks on it!" Velvet Hand replied, boldly. "I'm no man's dog, and when I do choose a master it won't be one who travels with a halter around his neck."

"Bold words, considering that you are a helpless prisoner in our hands!" the road-agent leader cried.

"I generally speak my mind wherever I am."

"Well, since you have refused our offer, now hear our little game!" Captain Death added. "We have got you foul and we intend to make something out of you. You're the king card-sharp of Cinnabar, and I reckon that you must have feathered your nest pretty well; now we propose to make you shell out. How much are you worth—ten thousand dollars?"

"I reckon that I ain't."

"Five thousand then?"

"Yes, I guess I can touch that figure."

"Good! write us an order on your banker for five thousand dollars; I'll send and have it cashed, and when the messenger returns you can go free."

"Oh, I reckon that I won't do that," Velvet Hand said, coolly.

"If you won't sign freely we shall be compelled to use unpleasant means," returned the road-agent. "We'll give you one hour to think the matter over, and then, if you still persist in your refusal, we'll slice off about an inch of your right ear; then another hour to consider the matter, and if you are still obstinate a similar slice off the left ear, and so on until both ears are gone, and then we'll commence on your fingers. They call you Velvet Hand, I believe, because you have such a light, womanly touch; we'll cure you of that if you hold out long enough, and then your pards can call you 'stumps.' Come on, boys, we'll leave this high-toned gentleman to solitary reflection."

And the road-agents withdrew to an outer apartment of the mountain cavern.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. REDAN'S LITTLE GAME.

IN the office of the Cinnabar mine sat Bertrand Redan, the superintendent of the works.

Redan was a man of twenty-eight or nine; a tall, well-built fellow, with jet-black hair, worn short and twisting itself into little crispy curls; a long, drooping mustache and pointed chin-pieces, the ends elaborately waxed, and of the same intense hue as the hair, ornamented the lower part of the face; he had full, fine eyes of uncertain tint, sometimes seeming black, at others appearing gray, and then again, in certain lights, and under certain impulses, showing green and cat-like. His complexion was a strange one, being unnaturally white, quite a contrast to the faces of the miners, his daily associates.

Particular care Bertrand Redan took of his handsome face, and the fact would have been apt to have rather damaged him in the opinion of the hard-fisted men of Cinnabar, but for the well-known truth, that, this one thing excepted, the superintendent of the Cinnabar mine was as rough and tough a customer as a man would be likely to meet with in a long journey.

Ready was he at all times to back his words with either fists or weapons, and Cinnabar City had learned long ago that the "head man" of the Cinnabar affair was fully able to take his own part.

Redan was not popular in the town. There was something about him that kept men at a distance. No chum—no bosom friend had he, unlike, in this particular, nearly every other person

to the district. He had a cold, proud way with him, and as plainly-spoken denizens were wont to express it, he went around "a-kinder a-holdin' up his nose as if he reckoned he was better nor common folks;" and yet, neither by word nor deed had the superintendent ever given the people of Cinnabar reason to think so; it was his general bearing, that was all.

And with the white-faced, iron-willed, resolute Bertrand sat the fat and greasy bummer, Joe Bowers.

The superintendent sat idly tilted back in a chair, puffing a long cigar, while the old and unsavory vagabond, stretched out upon a sort of lounge, which had been cleverly extemporized by spreading a buffalo-robe over some candle-boxes, was busily engaged in endeavoring to keep a short, black pipe in operation.

If the inhabitants of the lively town, the Queen City of the Shasta valley, could have peeped in at the window and witnessed this scene of contentment, they would have been much surprised at the evidence of intimacy thus plainly evinced, between the shrewd and rather domineering superintendent of the Cinnabar property and the veteran bummer, the irrepressible Joe Bowers, for there was nothing in common between the two, and in fact, few in the town knew that they were even acquainted.

The Cinnabar "boss" was none of your common fellows; he didn't mix with the crowd, and Bowers would have been the last man in the world to have been indicated as an intimate friend of the cool, determined Mr. Redan—Bert Redan, as he was generally termed.

Bowers had been absent from the "city" for about a month, and had only returned on the previous evening; he had spent the night at the Break o' Day House, having fallen in with the gay and festive Yuba Bill immediately after alighting from the stage in which he had journeyed from Yreka, and Yuba had confided to the veteran his idea for making a raise out of the Chinese wa-hoo-washee, which, as the reader knows, had resulted so disastrously to the proud Caucasians, and had nearly proved the death of the almond-eyed son of the flowery land.

"Well, how goes it, rocks?" Mr. Bowers observed, thus evidently opening a conversation.

"Oh, as well as can be expected," Redan answered in his careless, easy way.

"The mine is a hummer, isn't she? Oh, me most noble and potential dook! 'the rich east holds not her peer!' From the south to the east, north and north-westerly, the cry comes up; she knocks the socks outen any of 'em, you bet!"

Time had not withered the original Joe Bowers—that was clearly evident; nor staled his infinite variety.

"It's a rich lode."

"And didn't I say it, an' can't you tie to me every time! an' the man who says that I ain't worth my weight in gold-dust, when it comes to the clear white article, is a villain an' a goat-chief!"

"Your information in regard to this mine was perfectly correct; you certainly put me in for a good thing."

"I couldn't handle it myself, you know. I ain't the kind of hair-pin to cut a superintendent of a mine outen on; but I knew that you could make the trick every time, and it's a heap sight better than hangin' round Frisco, jes' makin' your grub, an' that's all."

"Del Colma is going to the devil, though, as fast as he can," Redan observed.

"Wot do you care?" Bowers asked; "when he plays out mebbe you'll be ready to play in."

"Yes, that is my idea, exactly."

"But have you got the money, my lord dook! Talk is cheap, you know, but it takes the rocks to buy land," and the original Joe Bowers looked sagely.

"Yes, I guess I can raise enough to manage the matter."

"But wot is the trouble with his noble nibs! Is he a-handlin' the 'papers,' or takin' a 'bowl' with the boys from Oshkosh too lively?"

"Oh, his drinking will never ruin him, although he's as good a customer as the Occidental knows; but, lately he's taken to playin' cards with a new man that has recently come to town. It's all night work, too; they get at it about nine at night and keep it up untill morning, and from a few little things that I have heard Del Colma say, I think that he has been losing pretty heavily."

"A new man, eh?" and a sly twinkle appeared in Bower's fish-like eyes. "an' has he got the ducats?"

"He always seems to have plenty of money," Bertrand replied.

"I must call on him. I play poker myself, once in a while," and Bowers smiled, proudly.

"Why, you have already made his acquaintance; it's Velvet Hand, the sharp that prevented you and the Break o' Day crowd from hanging the Chinaman last night."

"Oh that's all right, then," the bummer replied, evidently rather astonished at the information. "None of him in mine! He's too big for me to tackle. Ole Joe Bowers is no fool, no, sir-ee! I know the size of the animal I want."

"I know that Del Colma has lost very heavily, indeed, and there's a heavy mortgage on the mine which must be met shortly. I don't think that he can possibly raise money to meet it, and then comes my chance."

"Ye gentle auctioneer sails in, eh? an' you reckon to buy the property at sheriff's sale?"

"Oh, no!" Redan answered; "I'm playing a deeper game than that. I want money; but I want something else more."

Bowers winked his little eyes mysteriously.

"Ohi ye kin cut it as fat as any man that I know of, ye kin!"

"Yes, I rather flatter myself that I am up to a thing or two," returned the superintendent, complacently.

"Del Colma is no match for sich a sharp as you are, me royal magnifico!"

"No, I think not. He will soon get beyond his depth; next

week will probably bring matters to a focus. He'll need about ten thousand dollars, and I know a man who will lend it to him."

Bowers looked incredulous.

"That man is myself!"

And now the bummer looked astonished.

"I'm playing a bold game and a deep one. I have been fool enough to fall in love with Blanche del Colma, Ferdinand's sister, and so far, in spite of all my efforts, I haven't succeeded in making the slightest impression upon her. She's a deuced strange girl; I never saw a woman like her before; she doesn't seem to care for a fellow at all; she's fond enough of her horse, but she scarcely looks at a man. Well, now, just because she is that kind of a girl, I've made up my mind to have her. If I lend Fernando the money to save the mine, I shall have a claim upon her generosity; I know her peculiar, high-spirited nature; the feeling of debt will weigh her down, and she will be glad to quit the account by giving herself."

"It's a bully plan!" cried Bowers, warmly. "That's only one chance to upset it; s'pose she falls in love with some other galoot?"

"Bah! where is she to find a man to suit her fancy in this region?" Bertrand exclaimed.

CHAPTER VIII.

A BOLD STROKE.

With a calm face the helpless man watched the road-agents depart.

In one hour they would return, and then—but, one hour's respite was a great deal of time to give to such a man as Velvet Hand.

Within a single hour the tide of great battles has been turned, and a nation lost and won.

Scarcely had the figures of the masked men disappeared from sight when through the active mind of the prisoner plans of escape began to pass.

He was bound hand and foot—bound so securely that the road-agents left him to solitude with easy minds; they did not for a single instant dream that he would be able to free himself.

And Velvet Hand, supple and strong as a mountain lion, found it impossible to loosen the cord which confined his wrists.

"When the lion's skin falls short, eke it out with the fox's," wrote the ancient Greek, and the captive acted upon this advice. With all his wondrous strength he could not loosen the tightly-fastened cord; trick then must serve when force failed.

Availing himself of the rough surface of the wall, near which he was placed, grasping the jagged points with his hands, he pulled himself to his feet. The fastenings around his ankles allowed him to stand, although locomotion was impossible.

Stuck upon a projecting point of the rocky wall, within easy reach of his hands, was one of the candles whereby the cavern was lighted. Into the blaze of this candle the prisoner thrust the ends of the cord hanging from the knot which all his strength had been unable to break.

The device succeeded.

The consuming flame speedily charred the strands of the rope, eating its way into the knot until it gave way beneath the straining muscles.

The wrists of the man suffered, but Velvet Hand never flinched, for what was a trifling burn compared to the loss of a limb or life?

The cord parted; the prisoner's hands were free. An easy matter then for Velvet Hand to whip out his knife and sever the lariat of hide which bound his ankles.

"Now, my gentleman road-agent!" cried the Cinnabar man, as he drew forth his revolvers and examined the caps, "we will meet on more equal terms! I might as well take the bull by the horns as to wait for the scoundrels to come. I've an appointment in the defile above the McCloud canyon, and I'd like to get a few winks of sleep before that."

At the end of the cavern the mouth of a vaulted passage appeared, through which the road agents had departed. Cautiously Velvet Hand stole forward, entered the dark passage, a cocked revolver in each hand, expecting to encounter the outlaws at any moment.

Twenty—thirty steps he took; then, turning abruptly around a sharp corner, found himself in another cavern, larger in its dimensions than the inner one.

A single candle only illuminated the darkness, and close by the candle, which was placed on the top of a large boulder, sat the three road-agents in busy consultation.

So noiseless had been Velvet Hand's advance that the outlaws had not discovered his presence, and, concealed as he was in the gloom which hung around the mouth of the dark passage, it would have taken a sharper pair of eyes than ordinary humans are gifted with to have discovered his figure.

Just beyond the collection of boulders occupied by the desperadoes, was a passage-way through which shone a faint light—not an artificial illumination, but the clear, glorious light of the day-god.

This was evidently the portal to the outer world, but how to gain it! that was the question.

Velvet Hand reflected for a moment. Ambushed as he was, all the advantages on his side, he could easily have slain two of the outlaws before they could have raised a finger to have prevented it, but he shrunk from shedding blood; he did not wish to have even the deaths of these desperadoes upon his soul, and then there was a certain something in his nature that revolted at

the idea of slaying his foes without warning; to his mind it savored of assassination.

A plan came into his mind, which he proceeded at once to put into operation.

The cavern was a very large one, fully a hundred feet by a hundred, and the light afforded by the single candle only illuminated a small circle just around the bowlders.

Cautiously then, keeping close to the wall of the vaulted chamber, Velvet Hand proceeded to circle around the apartment, moving noiselessly as a shade.

About thirty feet from the mouth of the passage the road-agents were sitting.

Velvet Hand proceeded until he got between the outlaws and the outward passage. He had succeeded in gaining the position without alarming the three men in the least.

The desperadoes had been conversing in low tones, but Velvet Hand had approached so near that he could plainly distinguish their words, and as he came within ear-shot, he found that he formed the subject of the conversation.

"S'posen the sharp won't gi'n us the check for his dust, what then?" one of the fellows queried.

"Dead men tell no tales! that's what I say," cried the second outlaw.

Captain Death nodded his head.

"We'll finish him, eh, captain?" said the first ruffian.

"That's our programme," the road-agent leader remarked.

"I would like to get hold of his dust though, first."

"Sartin—five thousand dollars ain't to be sneezed at!"

"Oh, he won't sign!" the other outlaw cried; "he's a plucky customer."

"Maybe when we commence to alice his ears off he'll change his mind," Captain Death suggested, grimly. "I've taken the pluck out of these plucky chaps before."

"He's game—he won't flinch!" the first outlaw declared, decidedly.

"S'posen he does sign, will you let him go?" asked the second road-agent.

"No, of course not!" answered Captain Death. "Doesn't he know the secret of our hiding-place! We would be mad to let him go!"

And as this declaration came to the ears of Velvet Hand, he, standing with a leveled revolver in his hand, had a great mind to put an end to Captain Death's career there and then, and it required an effort to resist the impulse and confine himself to his original intention.

Velvet Hand fired, and the candle, snuffed out by the pistol-ball, tumbled from the bowlder.

The cavern was plunged in utter darkness.

The outlaws, though taken completely by surprise, had wit enough to fall flat upon their faces. They believed that the shot had been directed at their precious persons.

The instant he fired the Cinnabar sharp glided through the passage-way, which, as he had supposed, led directly to the mouth of the cavern.

A few moments and he stood again in the clear light of the morning, now growing stronger and stronger.

A glance around him—the entrance to the cave was hid by a clump of timber, so that one might pass close to it and yet not discover it—to fix the locality in his mind, and Velvet Hand hurried away. Fifty feet from the cavern he struck a trail which he recognized at once. It was the road from Angels to Cinnabar.

A half an hour later our hero was in the Occidental Hotel.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WATER-BIRD.

VELVET HAND entered the house, went up stairs to his room, threw himself on the bed, without undressing, and in five minutes was sleeping as sweetly and softly as an infant.

He slept about three hours, never even stirring from the position which he had first assumed, then awoke with a sudden start, glanced at the sun, now high in the heavens and sending its bright beams full into the little room. He pulled out his watch.

"By Jove! I'm afraid that I have overslept myself!" he exclaimed, but a glance at his timepiece reassured him. It was not yet nine. "I must be in the defile above the McCloud canyon by twelve," he continued; "and I want some breakfast before the walk."

He made a hasty toilet, merely sousing his face with cold water, wiped it off with the apology for a towel which the Occidental afforded to its guests, ran a comb through his dark locks, and then a stranger, to have looked at him, would never have dreamed that he had sat at a card-table all night long.

Descending to the restaurant, which was on the ground floor of the hotel—the Occidental boasted three stories now—he ordered breakfast, ate it, and started forth.

Straight up the river road he went, following the old trail which ran along the bank of the Shasta until the lower end of the McCloud canyon was reached; there the road bent inland, making a wide sweep to the west in order to avoid the rocky formation through which the restless waters of the swift-flowing Shasta had cut its way, thus forming the great McCloud canyon.

For about two miles the trail skirted the rocky wall and then turned abruptly back again to the river, running through the little valley where, in the early days of Cinnabar City, the partners of the Cinnabar lode had waged such a desperate fight with the great chief of the McCloud Indians, Koo-choo, the Hog, and his warriors.

In the center of the little defile Velvet Hand halted and looked carefully around him. It was evident that he expected to behold some one, but rugged rocks, giant bowlders, cone-like juniper bushes and spiny-leaved pines alone met his eyes; no human form was in sight.

He consulted his watch. It wanted but a minute to twelve.

The man was well armed. Besides the self-cocking revolvers which he carried in his pockets, a leather belt was buckled to his waist which supported two more pistols, six shotguns, and a long broad-bladed bowie-knife.

This was an unusual armament for Velvet Hand, for he seldom displayed his weapons.

"I will wait," he murmured. "I never knew one of the reds to fail to keep an appointment, if life remained."

He sat down upon a bowlder, still keeping a cautious watch about him.

Not long did he wait, for within five minutes a light form came hurrying through the dark-green shrubbery which fringed the upper end of the valley.

A red-skin, and a woman!

A fair one, too, although her skin was of a dusky hue, but she trod the sterile soil with the step of a princess, and even the cold-hearted man of the world could not repress a glance of admiration as he watched the movements of the lithe form, stepping so gracefully along the uneven path.

Velvet Hand's first meeting with this Indian girl had been a most romantic one. Enjoying a day's shooting on the upper Shasta, he had encountered the girl "treed" by a grizzly bear.

The girl had come suddenly and unexpectedly upon the lord of the wild rocks, and the bear, startled by the presence of the human in his rocky wastes, had given chase.

Luckily a stout tree was near at hand, and into its branches the girl had clambered, but the bear, loth to leave his prey, kept close watch at the foot of the tree.

The white's timely arrival raised the siege, and the grizzly monarch turned upon the new-comer.

Although Velvet Hand "hadn't lost any b'ar," to repeat the mountain saying, and wasn't particularly desirous of finding one, yet on this occasion he was compelled to give battle, for the brute allowed him no time to retreat.

A single shot settled the matter, for with that marvelous skill with firearms for which he was noted, he sent a ball straight through the eye of the mountain monarch into the brain, killing the beast almost instantly.

Of course the gratitude of the Indian maid knew no bounds, and the white was somewhat embarrassed by the outpouring of thanks which came so freely from her lips.

In answer to his inquiries she stated that she was of the Tonaton tribe, and that her name was Hula-ha-ha, which, translated into English, meant Water-bird.

A prettier Indian maid Velvet Hand had never seen, although he had had much experience with the savage people of Northern California.

Twice after the first meeting the white had encountered the girl, and both times she had come to seek him in Cinnabar, taking the precaution, however, to enter the town early in the morning and to seclude her charming face in the folds of her blanket, so as not to provoke impertinent curiosity.

On the first visit she had brought the skin of the grizzly bear, beautifully tanned and ornamented in the highest style of savage art.

This keepsake, after some solicitation, Velvet Hand accepted, and on her second visit she had brought a ring rudely hammered out of a pure nugget of gold, and this present also Velvet Hand took, although he remonstrated against so doing and told the girl frankly that the service was already amply acknowledged.

But the gratitude of the Indian seemed as boundless as the heavens, and she had replied that while she lived she would never forget.

And on the previous day to this one whereon we have traced Velvet Hand's steps, he had received word by an old squaw that the girl wished to meet him at a certain place and at a certain hour—that his life was in danger, and that she could inform him how he might preserve it.

At first the white felt inclined not to go, but, despite his heart of stone and head of iron, some little spark of curiosity yet lingered within his breast, and he wondered who it was that threatened his life, and how it came that the Indian girl knew aught of the matter.

Thus it happened that Velvet Hand waited in the lonely defile above the McCloud canyon for the coming of the Tonaton girl.

She came onward with rapid steps, and Velvet Hand rose to receive her.

"I have come, you see," he said.

"Hula-ha-ha is glad to see the white chief," the girl replied, her voice ear eat and her face troubled. "She was afraid that he would not trust the warning sent and that he would not come."

"You excited my curiosity; you sent word that my life was in danger, and I am anxious to know who threatens it."

The girl was evidently much troubled, for she hesitated before replying.

"The McClouds are a great nation," she said at last. "Does the chief know of them?"

"Yea, something, but not much," Velvet Hand replied, rather puzzled at this beginning. He had not imagined danger from red foes, but from white.

"Hula-ha-ha is sorry now that she deceived the white chief," the girl said, sadly.

"How have you deceived me?" the white asked, amazed.

"Hula-ha-ha is not a Tonaton: she is a McCloud!"

"A McCloud?"

"The daughter of a great chief, she did not dare to tell who she was, for the white chiefs hate her father," the maiden said, in faltering tones.

And then, before Velvet Hand could reply, the fierce Indian yell rung on the air, and every boulder appeared to be crowned by a painted chief.

Velvet Hand's revolvers glistened in his hand; the girl crouched at his feet; a bloody conflict seemed near at hand.

CHAPTER X.

THE "HOG" TALKS BUSINESS.

Sudden was the irruption, complete the surprise.

The dusky forms of a hundred well-armed warriors crowned the rocks of the defile.

Armed to the teeth was Velvet Hand, but what could one man do against a host!

And the Indian maid, crouching at his feet; like another Samson, he had been betrayed, by a woman, to defeat and death; he wondered, too, that she could be brought to lend herself to such a deception, for gratitude is generally the strongest impulse due to the savage breast.

High on the crest of a lava rock stood the great chief of the McClouds; as proud a king—dusky though his skin and barbarian his pomp—as any Old World monarch of them all.

In his hand he bore a patent breech-loading rifle. The days of savage weapons have long since passed away, and the modern red chief meets his foe armed with weapons of the latest pattern, thanks to the paternal care of a benevolent government which provides its "helpless" wards with the latest style of weapons, so that they may be enabled to kill game—and white men—with ease and grace.

"Betrayed to death by you, Water-bird!" Velvet Hand exclaimed, as, with an undaunted front, he faced the fearful odds arrayed against him.

"As the bright stars can witness, I am innocent!" the girl moaned, evidently deeply afflicted.

There was truth in her voice if ever truth spoke in human accents, and the imperiled man believed her.

Motionless as statues for a moment stood all the actors in this strange scene; the savage warriors with brandished weapons in their dusky hands, waiting but for the signal of their chief to spring forward at once to the slaughter of the solitary white, and Velvet Hand, as cool of eye and as steady of nerve as though all this startling, warlike display was but an empty pageant, "full of sound and fury but signifying nothing."

And then a change came over the spirit of the scene; the McCloud chief spoke:

"Let my warriors hold off their hands, and you, bold white chief, throw down your little guns!"

"Oh, no!" Velvet Hand replied, quickly; "while I live I'll hang on to my weapons. You red fellows have the advantage just now, but if I must die, be sure I will have company in crossing the dark river!"

The McCloud chief frowned as he listened to the bold words of the white.

"And will my brother dare attempt to resist the braves of the red McClouds in their native hills?" the old warrior cried, lustily. "Let my brother throw down his weapons and beg for mercy! If he tries to play the wolf, let him not murmur if the red hunters give to him the fate of the wolf!"

"Does the chief think to scare me with words?" Velvet Hand replied, contemptuously. "Let him talk to the winds, and bid them be still when they choose to blow. Alone—a single man am I, but before you take my scalp, I'll send some of your warriors to their long home. Trust to your mercy! Oh, no! If I must face death, it shall be with arms in my hands and not as a bound and helpless prisoner."

For a moment the McCloud chieftain seemed undecided; he looked at his red warriors and he looked at the daring white man who so boldly held his ground.

As well as any man in the Western wilds he knew how lightly the cool-eyed white man held that precious jewel which men call life; no stranger was he to the story of the past wherein the desperate white chief had played so prominent and bloody a part.

The red McCloud was an acute and wily chieftain. He had a deep purpose in view in springing this trap upon the white man. Through his trusty spies he had learned of the acquaintanceship which had been so strangely formed between the white man and the young McCloud girl, and had seized upon it as a means to lure Velvet Hand into his power. Acting under his direction, one of the old squaws had suggested to the girl—who had confided to the aged crone her acquaintanceship with the Cinnabar man—that she could easily pay the debt of gratitude due to the white man by revealing to him a secret "pocket" in the mountain where the precious gold-dust could be procured, and this was the reason why the Water-bird had wished for the interview; but it was all a scheme on the part of the old chieftain to get the white man into his power. The secret "pocket" in the mountain existed only in the imagination of the old squaw.

The plan had succeeded in every particular, excepting that the McCloud chief had anticipated that the white man would surrender upon seeing the number that opposed him, and the bold defiance of Velvet Hand had surprised him.

Koo-choo, the Hog, meant business; it was not merely to take the scalp of the white man that he had intrigued to lure him to the lonely defile above the McCloud canyon, but he had a far deeper purpose in view.

The bold attitude of the white man, however, did not suit him. He did not desire to treat with Velvet Hand as with a potentate of equal power, but preferred to have him helpless—a prisoner in his hands, and then talk to him.

In fact, the wily McCloud chief wanted all the advantage on his side.

But it was not to be.

The trick had succeeded; the white was in the defile alone, surrounded by the armed red-men, but he had not surrendered, nor did he intend to.

A conflict was not to be thought of, for an attack would defeat the purpose which the red chief had in view. Therefore, with as good a grace as possible, the McCloud chief prepared to make the best of the situation.

"The Red McClouds would be friends with the bold white chief," he said, with great dignity.

Velvet Hand smiled; the idea pleased him. Force had failed; the chief would now try cunning.

"No man in all the great north land would the warriors of the McCloud sooner call brother than the white chief who is as brave as the bear, as cunning as the beaver, and as wise as the owl," continued the old warrior. "In the mind of the McCloud chief lives the past. He remembers his brother when he was the great chief of the Shasta nation and wore the war-paint of the red-man. His white brothers do not treat him well; why does he dwell with them in their lodges up the river? Why does he not make his home with the red-men in the mountain wilderness? The Shastas are no longer a great tribe, but the McClouds are the lords of all the northern land; the Red McClouds will be glad to welcome so great a warrior as my brother, and they will do him honor."

And then the old chief waved his hand. Instantly the signal was obeyed, and like magic the savage warriors vanished, each separate brave sinking to his covert amid the rocks with ghost-like celerity.

Then down from his lofty perch the old warrior stepped, and, casting his rifle into the hollow of his arm, he advanced directly to the little level spot where Velvet Hand stood.

The Indian girl rose to her feet as the old warrior came on, and, stepping back a few paces, surveyed him with a curious look upon her pretty face, for the young squaw was pretty, despite her dusky complexion and the unmistakable Indian cast to her features.

Koo-choo halted in front of the white, and his black glittering eyes peered curiously first at Velvet Hand and then at the girl.

"My brother is a great brave—a cunning one, too, or else the Water-bird would never have flown from her wigwam to meet him. Does my brother know that Etula-ha-ha is the daughter of Koo-choo, and that she shall be the squaw of the white man if he wishes her?"

This was business with a vengeance.

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT THE "HOG" WANTED.

THE maiden modestly cast down her eyes, but the look of joy upon her face told only too plainly that she would be no unwilling bride.

Velvet Hand glanced at the girl for a moment in his odd, peculiar way, while the old chief watched him eagle-eyed.

Then the white turned his attention to the McCloud warrior.

"You do me too much honor," he said, quietly. "What am I to do for you in return?"

The chief drew himself up proudly.

"The McCloud warrior does not sell his daughter!" he exclaimed, in haughty dignity. "He gives her to his white brother; that is all."

"And yet, if you desired a service at my hands I should feel bound to comply," Velvet Hand suggested, shrewdly.

"Ah, that is another matter," the old chief said, his dark eyes flashing with a cunning light; then he beckoned the white to a spot a little remote from the one where the girl was standing.

"The McClouds are jealous of the white men in the valley," he continued, cautiously. "Their lodges grow too fast; some day the red warriors will take the war-path and drive the gold-diggers away."

Velvet Hand shook his head sadly.

"Has the chief forgotten the fate of the Shastas?" he asked. "It is useless to try to drive back the whites by force. It cannot be done."

"Then my brother would not join the McClouds if they took the war-path against the white men?"

"No."

"Not if he took the Water-bird to sing in his wigwam?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because the attempt is useless and would only end in the destruction of your tribe."

The old warrior nodded his head, sagely.

"So the great chief of the McClouds thinks, and when the Modocs talked of the war-path he said, 'No,' just as my brother has said."

"Are the Modocs dissatisfied?" asked Velvet Hand, astonished at the intelligence.

"Yes; their treaty is all lies; no blankets but old ones cut in two, their meat and flour rotten."

"But they are only a handful."

"In the lava-beds they will fight like the old mountain-bees fights for her comb."

"Let them fight, chief, but you and your tribe keep out of it," the white cautioned.

The old chief grinned.

"Talk fight much, maybe, but no fight. Will the chief take the Water-bird?"

"And what must I do for her?" Velvet Hand was evading the question.

"Not much," and the old chief looked inquisitively in the face of the white as if he rather hesitated to commit himself further.

"But what, chief, what must I do?"

"The white chief will do it?"

"Let me know first what it is."

It was diamond cut diamond between these two.

"The Water-bird is a fine squaw—no better squaw in all the McCloud nation."

"She is a fine girl," the white assented.

"She is as dear to the heart of the chief as the little stars to the sky, but for the sake of his white brother the McCloud warrior gives her up."

"Yes."

"It is only right that my brother should do something for so fine a squaw; many a young brave in the McCloud nation would give twenty ponies for the Water-bird."

"She is worth much," Velvet Hand said, sententiously.

"And yet, the McCloud chief does not ask his white brother to buy her; he gives her freely, for my brother is a great chief. All he asks is a favor."

"Exactly, and that favor is—"

"The great chief of the McCloud nation is a lonely man; his wigwam is empty," said the old warrior, impressively, and bringing his greasy face close to the ear of the white man.

"Ah, I understand; you want a squaw!"

"My brother speaks with a straight tongue; the McCloud chief does want a squaw."

"And you desire my assistance in the matter?"

The chief nodded.

"And in that way I am to requite the gift of the Water-bird?"

Again the old warrior nodded assent.

"And the squaw—who is she?"

"She is a white squaw."

"I supposed so."

"My brother once owned the mine in the white lodges up the river called Cinnabar."

Velvet Hand could hardly restrain a start of surprise.

"Well, what of it?"

"The bad white men took from my brother what was his; he made them pay dearly for it, but he never got it back again."

And now it was Velvet Hand's turn to nod.

"My brother can help the McCloud chief to his squaw and at the same time be revenged upon the chief who has the mine."

"Oho! I think that I guess the squaw you mean."

"She rides the spotted pony."

The truth was out now; the greasy red butcher, the brawny old chief of the McClouds had cast his evil eyes upon the dainty Californian girl, Blanche del Colmal.

The old warrior had watched the face of the white with an eager eye, but not a single movement of the muscles rewarded his scrutiny. The face of Velvet Hand was a face of wax as far as betraying his feelings was concerned.

"My brother will help me!" the old red-skin asked, anxiously.

"It will be difficult," the white responded, gravely.

"It is difficult to tear the Water-bird away from the young braves of her nation," the old chief responded, "but for the sake of his white brother the great McCloud chief has done it."

"And if the chief should get the white squaw the white warriors would follow and tear her from him; the white squaw might cost the best blood of the McCloud tribe."

The old heathen shook his head and a cunning expression appeared upon his bronzed features.

"The chief will hide the squaw away; there's many a defile in the mountain where the foot of the pale-face has never trodden. My brother shall lead the squaw into an ambush, the red chiefs will seize her and carry her to a lonely canyon where a bird alone can track her. Who then shall say that the warriors of the McCloud know anything of the white squaw?"

Velvet Hand laughed—a bitter, sarcastic laugh.

"You put vengeance right into my hand, eh, chief? The brother holds my property; the sister I steal and give to you. Why, it is as easy as rolling off a log!"

"My white brother consents, then—he will do the red-man's bidding!" exclaimed the McCloud, in great glee.

"Why, it is not in mortal man to refuse such an offer," Velvet Hand answered, "but it will take time."

"Yes."

"I will send you a message."

"Yes; will you take the squaw now?"

"No, let her wait for me with her tribe. After I put the white squaw in your hands will be time enough to claim her. Let one of your braves watch this spot by day and by night in readiness to receive a message from me."

"It shall be done."

"And till then farewell, and as I keep my promise so keep you yours."

exact truth, the wily savage was far from being satisfied with the ambiguous giving out of the Cinnabar sharp.

The white man had not refused, neither had he accepted, and the Red McCloud was sorely afraid that the pale-face was "playing it" upon him, to use the term common to the wild West.

But there was no other course open to the red-skin than to appear satisfied even if he was not.

"The McCloud girl will wait with her people until the great white chief comes for her," the old warrior continued. "It is good!"

But, it was not good, and Koo-choo, the Hog, was not the only chief in the McCloud nation who was to have a say in the matter for the moment the old warrior finished his speech, forth from the line of red braves stepped a young but brawny chief.

Little Horse he was called, and as a warrior he stood second to none in all the nation.

"Koo-choo, the Hog, is the great chief of the red McCloud; Hula-ha-ha, the Water-bird, is his child, and it is his right to say to whom he will give her, but the warriors of the red McCloud are not children that he shall say to them: 'This is a great white chief; bow down and obey him.' What red chief of our nation gains the right to braid the eagle-plumes in his hair and call himself a brave until he has proved his courage and skill? Why should the great McCloud chief seek a husband for his daughter in the smoke of the white lodges, when among the hills of Shasta there are red warriors as brave as the moose and as wily as the wild-cat?"

A little hum of approval went round the savage line at these bold words.

And then before the old chief, who was totally unprepared for this demonstration, could collect his thoughts to reply, forth stepped another brawny chief.

A brave of middle age this time, and as ugly a customer as the eye of mortal man had ever looked upon.

The One-eyed Crow he was called, and his reputation as a warrior was great, but a more bloodthirsty ruffian never stepped foot upon a war-trail. Little wonder was it then that when he came a-wooing to the dainty Water-bird, the dusky beauty turned a deaf ear to his suit.

"Straight as the eagle darting upon his prey go the words of the young McCloud warrior to the mark," said the old, scarred-faced chief; he had suffered the loss of an eye in early youth, hence his name. "There are as great warriors in the McCloud nation as can be found upon the solid earth. Why cannot the daughter of the great McCloud chief select a husband in her own tribe? Why should she seek to mate with the false white men who have stolen the land of the red chiefs? Is this pale-face a greater brave than can be found in the red McCloud nation? I for one deny it! Let him prove that he is a better man than the McCloud warriors can boast before he seeks to take the fairest jewel of the tribe for his squaw."

Again there came a hum of approval from the lips of the red-men, and the wily Koo-choo saw that this demonstration was one not to be easily passed over.

As for the Cinnabar man he saw himself placed in a most unpleasant position. It was very evident that these two bold-speaking warriors meant "business." If he wanted the red maiden they intended that he should not get her without a struggle.

Now when it is considered that he hadn't the slightest idea of forming an alliance with the dusky daughter of the red McClouds, and that he had merely temporized in the matter so as to get out of the predicament in which he so unexpectedly found himself, with as little difficulty as possible, to become involved in a quarrel with two red warriors was far from pleasant.

As brave as any mortal living was the cool, keen-eyed man of Cinnabar; utterly reckless, too, of his own life, caring but little whether he lived or died, having but few ties to bind him to the world; yet to enter into a life and death struggle with these envious red chieftains solely for the sake of a woman who was no more to him than any other dusky damsel of the woods was utterly ridiculous; but, how to escape from the embarrassing position was a puzzle.

True, he might openly declare that he did not want the Water-bird, and simply declined the honor of the alliance which old Koo-choo the Hog had arranged for him; but, in that case there was little doubt that the baffled chief would raise the war-shout, and that, instead of encountering the two warriors, he, single-handed, would have to fight all the savage host.

As to the McCloud chief he was not sorry that affairs had taken this sudden and unexpected turn. The white man would be forced to declare himself. He must either fight for the girl, thus practically accepting her, or else decline the alliance altogether, and in this latter case the old red butcher mentally promised himself the pleasure of "lifting" the scalp of his esteemed white brother on the instant.

But, the old chief wished Velvet Hand to accept; he coveted the fair Californian girl, and he believed that he could easily secure her through the aid of the white man. He therefore determined to force Velvet Hand into the contest.

"The ears of the great McCloud chief are always open to the words of his warriors," began the old scoundrel, gravely. "He cannot blame the McCloud warriors that they are angry at the thoughts of the Water-bird leaving her people to sing in the lodge of a pale stranger. The white chief is a great brave; many moons ago he fought the warriors of the red McClouds and brought sorrow to their wigwams. Koo-choo knows it, and therefore is he satisfied to receive the white man as a son-in-law; he is proud to have so great a chief wed a daughter of the McClouds, just as long ago he wed the queen of the Shastas. But, it is only right that my braves should call for deeds as well

as words. The white chief wants the McCloud girl—he will fight for her with any brave of the nation who cares to challenge him, and I, the great chief of the tribe, will see that the fight is fair is it good?"

A very emphatic grunt came from the lips of the red warriors. This sort of thing was exactly to their liking; and then, too, there was hardly a man in the savage ranks who doubted that the white man would be beaten in the struggle. The young chief, The Little Horse, was as fine a brave as the McCloud tribe could boast; and, as for the ugly, scarred faced One-eyed Crow, deeds of blood were so heavy on his head, that there was not a red butcher in the nation, Koo-choo, the Hog, alone excepted, who could boast a bloodier record.

Velvet Hand was in for it; there was no escape, and therefore with as good a grace as possible he prepared to "face themusic."

"I am ready for the trial!" he exclaimed. "Let the red braves who doubt that I am a great chief step forward, and on their heads I will prove that I am as good a man as any red warrior in the McCloud tribe."

Eagerly the two warriors who had spoken stepped forward.

"The Little Horse and the One-eyed Crow," said Koo-choo, indicating the two. "Which one will encounter the white chief first?"

As crafty as he was bloodthirsty was the older McCloud warrior, and he warily calculated that if the Little Horse took the first chance the white man might disable him, and so a powerful rival would be removed, and even if he conquered the pale chief, matters would be no worse than they were at present, so the old brave spoke instantly:

"Let the Little Horse take the first chance," he said; "he was the first to speak and it is his right."

The young brave eagerly accepted the position.

Face to face the rivals met.

"I bear no malice to my red brother," observed Velvet Hand, gazing with a keen eye at the intelligent and pleasing face of the young McCloud warrior. "It is merely a question between us as to which is the better man. We need not seek each other's lives; let us lay aside our weapons and with our bare hands, muscle against muscle, struggle for the mastery."

The young warrior accepted the condition, and soon, stripped of all useless incumbrances, the two faced each other.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TRIAL.

A **FINE** contrast the two presented. The dusky-faced son of the wilderness, the child of the lava rocks, and the pale, eagle-eyed sharp of Cinnabar.

Fairly matched in size and build were the two, no apparent advantage on either side.

The savage chief had stripped off his hunting-shirt, exposing his brawny chest, and arrayed only in leggings and moccasins, was splendidly prepared for the contest.

Velvet Hand had removed his coat and vest, bound a handkerchief around his waist, rolled up the sleeves of his daintily ruffled shirt, thus plainly displaying the muscles of his massive arms, the sight of which rather astonished the red warriors, who, squatting upon the neighboring rocks, were eagerly watching the preparations for the contest.

They had no idea that the white chief possessed such a pair of arms, and even the confident McCloud chief looked rather dubious when he beheld such an unusual muscular development.

To use the saying common to the sporting fraternity, Velvet Hand "stripped big."

"Ready, chief?" said the white.

"Ready," responded the Indian, and then, with the word, he rushed upon the Cinnabar man. It was his intention to force the white down by sheer strength, but Velvet Hand knew a trick worth two of that.

His strong arms brushed the outstretched hands of the red chief away, and, grasping him in a peculiar way, before the Indian could realize the intention, he was jerked violently off his feet and laid flat on the broad of his back in a most summary manner.

A grunt of astonishment came from the lips of the red-men; never before had they witnessed such a performance, and as for the young chief, who was not injured in the least, except that his pride had received a terrible shock, he grew fairly black in the face with rage. He felt that the white chief had made a plaything of him.

Springing to his feet, furious in his anger, he rushed desperately at the cool and wary white.

No chance this time to try the tricks of the wrestler's art, for the rush of the Indian was like the maddening charge of the bison bull; but, nimble on his feet as a dancing-master, Velvet Hand dodged under the arm of the Indian, turned quickly, and as the savage checked himself, and essayed to follow the example of his dextrous white antagonist, Velvet Hand caught him a terrible blow on the neck, just under the ear, which felled the red-man as though he had been shot.

Down he went, his head striking with a dull thump, and for a minute or two the chief remained motionless on the ground.

He had been knocked out of time.

With his hands folded low down about his waist, the favorite breathing position of the practiced sparrer, Velvet Hand waited for the red-man to revive.

And the stolid red-men, crouching upon their rocks of vantage, like so many huge red toads, watched with wondering eyes this strange encounter.

It was the first time that the bold warriors of the red McClouds had ever assisted at a "boxing match."

Slowly the senses of the stunned red chief came back to him, and he rose to his feet, an expression of pronounced amazement upon his face.

Never before in all his life had he been so roughly handled, and yet he was accounted one of the most expert wrestlers in the tribe; but that he was no match for the strong limbed, skillful white man was plainly evident. Nine warriors out of ten would have been quite satisfied to give up the contest at this point, but the young and proud chief was loath to cry "enough" so soon.

With careful steps, then, he approached his adversary, who simply unfolded his arms in readiness for the attack.

The chief approached almost within arm's length, and then, concentrating all his strength, sprung upon the white.

Not an inch of ground did Velvet Hand give, but his strong right arm shot out, the blow striking the Indian full in the neck, just under the chin, taking him off his feet, and hurling him over backward with terrible force.

Few men had endurance enough to enable them to receive a second one of these terrible right-handers, and the McCloud chief was not one of these few.

It was three minutes at least before he recovered from the awful shock, and some of his friends, believing that the blow had been fatal, hastened to his assistance. They raised him to his feet; he could stand, but it was quite plain that he was in no condition to renew the contest, and so the wondering braves assisted him to leave the field where he had met with such a complete defeat.

The One-eyed Crow had watched the struggle in astonishment, and too late he understood how great was the task he had taken upon himself; but he did not shrink, for as brave as any race of men that ever lived are the red warriors, after their own fashion.

But the old chief made up his mind that he would not encounter the white man with bare hands, after witnessing his prowess.

The Little Horse removed from the field of action, the old warrior stepped forward.

From his girdle the red-skin drew the long, keen-edged scalp-lung-knife.

"A warrior's weapon is mine!" he exclaimed. "Let the pale chief understand that when he faces the One-eyed Crow it is for life or death!"

A quiet smile passed over the iron-like face of the Cinnabar sharp, as he listened to the bravado of the McCloud warrior.

"If the white chief does not fear to look upon death, let him take his weapon and face the McCloud warrior, whose wigwam is lined with the scalps of his enemies."

Again the lip of Velvet Hand curled in contempt.

"What McCloud warrior will lend me a sharp knife, that I may give this great brave his ticket to the happy hunting-ground?" demanded the white, in evident scorn.

Koo-choo, the Hog, drew his own knife from his girdle, and pitched it toward the pale-face.

There was but little doubt in the mind of the old chief that the Cinnabar man would be as good as his word.

The glittering knife fell right at the feet of Velvet Hand; he grasped it, and not an instant too soon, for hardly had he again assumed the upright position before the ruthless red chief was upon him.

No better handler of the long Indian knife was there in all the nation than this bloody-minded red slayer.

His favorite game was to expose his left arm to the slash of his opponent's knife, and at the same moment drive his own weapon home to his antagonist's heart.

But this time he met a foeman worthy of his steel.

As the red chief rushed in to close quarters, Velvet Hand suddenly assumed the offensive and slashed at the Indian's breast. The One-eyed Crow threw up his knife to ward off the blow, and then, with a sudden whirl, Velvet Hand cut the Indian across the knuckles with the keen-edged blade. A howl of pain escaped from the lips of the savage, despite the grim resolution, so great a characteristic of the old chief.

Velvet Hand was quick to improve the advantage he had gained. He closed in with the chief, caught his right wrist with his left hand, and then, dextrously giving him the trip, threw him over on his back, adding his own weight to the fall.

The warrior writhed like a wounded serpent; but he was completely helpless in the firm grip of the pale-face, and the keen-edged knife of the white was scratching the skin of the chest, waiting but the force of the strong right arm to drive it home to the heart of the red chief.

"Yield or die!" cried Velvet Hand.

"Strike!" replied the warrior, in bitter, impotent rage; "the McCloud warrior does not fear to die!"

But it was no part of the white man's policy to kill the red brave, and thereby incur the enmity of all his kindred; in time to come he might need the aid of all the McClouds.

With a dextrous movement he wrested the knife from the warrior's hand, and sent it spinning over the rocks.

"The victory is mine without bloodshed!" said the white, rising. "I scorn to strike when I can spare!"

The struggle was over and Velvet Hand free to depart.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DIAMOND RING.

STRAIGHT for the city of Cinnabar went Velvet Hand, walking on with tireless strides, but the rapidity of his steps bore no comparison with the surge of the thoughts whirling through his brain.

The interview with the McCloud chief seemed like the baseless fabric of a dream.

"Am I then a renegade from my race that the dusky heathen thinks to use me for a tool?" he muttered. "Has the sun which has bronzed my skin changed also my heart? A fair bribe he offers. He is right! There is no prettier squaw in the McCloud nation than this dusky beauty. And the chief gives her to me!" The white man laughed, his quiet, bitter laugh. "The old rascal! The girl is mine already if I choose to take her, and neither the great chief of the McClouds nor all his tribe, were they ten times more powerful than they really are, could keep her from me or take her, once she was safe in Cinnabar town with me. And Blanche del Colma, too! would no other white squaw in the settlement suit him but this dainty Californian beauty, pure as a lily and as proud as though the olden days still lingered and she could claim the free control of ten thousand broad acres! Blood! the seizure of this dark-eyed girl would cause a river of it to flow! Strange what a world this is! For the sake of a white squaw this filthy savage, ugly as sin itself, would put in peril not only his own life, but the very existence of all his people; and what a mean, miserable wretch he must think me, when he dares to boldly propose such a bargain to me!"

Bitter indeed were the thoughts of the wayward man, whose life had been such a constant struggle between good and evil.

The pine forest passed he came again in full view of the swift-flowing Shasta, rippling along so merrily over its rocky bed. And as he came into the broad trail by the river the sound of a horse's hoofs in rapid gallop fell upon his ears.

"Whoever rides that beast is riding fast!" he murmured, surprised at the unusual speed so plainly indicated.

And then around the bend in the road came the flying steed.

A riderless horse, although the bridle and the bitted mouth plainly betrayed that, at a very recent period, a master's hand had controlled the animal. There was no saddle upon the back, and Velvet Hand quickly and easily guessed the nature of the accident that had evidently but just occurred.

As the horse came so fleetly on, the velvet sharp recognized the animal: it was the spotted mustang of Blanche del Colma!

To spring into the center of the trail, throw up his hands and check the speed of the panting steed was but the work of a moment, and, as the horse shied off to one side and endeavored to plunge into the thicket of scrubby pines which lined the way, it was an easy matter to lay hold of the reins and so make captive the steed.

Once the bridle was fairly in his grasp, Velvet Hand swung himself upon the horse's back. Like the wild red chiefs he could ride as well without a saddle as with one.

He urged the horse around the bend in the road, expecting to behold its fair mistress, and he was not disappointed.

A half a mile or so down the trail stood the girl, busily engaged in coiling up the heavy masses of her glorious blue-black hair which had been disarranged by her fall.

By her side upon the green turf was the fancifully-ornamented Mexican saddle which had been strapped upon the mustang's back.

Velvet Hand rode straight up to the girl, and she acknowledged his salutation as politely as though he had been an emperor instead of one of the wildest sports in the city of Cinnabar.

"This is your horse, I fancy, miss," he said, dismounting, but still keeping a firm grip upon the animal's bridle. "I succeeded in stopping it a short distance down the road."

"I am very much obliged, sir," she replied; "the girth parted, and so I lost my seat in the saddle."

"Permit me to repair the damage."

Years of experience in the wild prairie life had taught him how to quickly repair the damage of such a mishap, and in a few minutes the girth was spliced and the pretty saddle again strapped upon the mustang's back.

Velvet offered his hand to assist the girl to mount, but with a smile she declined the aid and vaulted into the saddle as lightly, almost, as a bird.

"Thanks, sir!" she exclaimed, gathering up the reins; "at present I am your debtor, but I hope to soon requite the obligation."

"To be able to oblige a lady is quite sufficient payment for such a service," the gentleman answered, gallantly.

"Oh, believe me, I shall not be satisfied until I repay the obligation!" Blanche exclaimed, bowing graciously, and as she bent her superb head her eyes caught sight of a diamond ring upon the little finger of Velvet Hand.

A look of amazement appeared upon her face and an exclamation of astonishment burst from her lips.

"That ring, senor!" she cried.

For a moment Velvet Hand appeared puzzled, but the look vanished almost as soon as it had appeared. He could not mistake the ring she referred to, for it was the only one he wore.

"This," he said, holding it up to view.

It was an odd, peculiar ring; one once seen not easily to be forgotten. It was fashioned after the pattern of a coiled snake, and the diamond—a beautiful stone—was securely clutched within the outstretched jaws of the reptile's head.

"Pardon me, senor, if I express amazement," she explained; "but the ring is so familiar to me; may I ask how the ring came into your possession?"

"Certainly, it is yours," and Velvet Hand slipped the trinket from his finger as he spoke and handed it to the girl.

"Yes, it is mine; it was my father's."

"I found it, senorita," replied Velvet Hand, unblushingly. He fully understood the case. Fernando, in his mad passion for

play, had possessed himself of the ring, and lacking money to pay his "debt of honor" had pledged the jewel.

"Oh, thanks, senor!" the girl exclaimed, her cheeks flushing and her dark eyes sparkling. "It is not the value of the ring I prize, but the remembrance which is attached to it."

"I am pleased at being able to restore it to you," the card-sharp replied, gallantly, and then over his mind as he spoke came the thought that Fernando would be terribly enraged when he learned of the occurrence.

"Two favors in one day I owe you, senor. I fear that I shall be your debtor for some time, but if gratitude can repay the obligation, then, senor, you are paid, for I am very grateful."

There was a flush on the peach-like cheek of the beauty, a kindling light in her dark eyes which plainly told that these words were more than empty lip-service.

"Miss, I am more than paid at being able to serve you."

"You are a friend of my brother, I believe!"

"Well, I'm an acquaintance, miss," the man replied, honestly.

"Perhaps my brother may find a way to serve you."

"Oh, don't speak of that, miss, but now that I think of it, I'd like to give you a word of advice. Be careful in your horseback excursions not to go far from the town. These Northern Indians cannot be trusted, and death would be far preferable to the fate which would surely await you if you should fall into their hands."

"I shall be careful. Oh, senor! you heap obligation upon obligation. Adieu!" And with a farewell glance such as no man in the Shasta valley had ever before received from Blanche del Colma's glorious, dark eyes, she spurred away.

Velvet Hand followed slowly down the road, a strange expression upon his manly face, strange thoughts in his clear, knightly mind.

And, just as his figure disappeared from view around the lower bend of the road, out from the pine thicket stepped Yuba Bill and Bertrand Redan.

CHAPTER XV.

A MASTER IN CRAFT.

BOTH of the men were armed to the teeth. They had been coming down the trail from Angel's Bar which joined the main road about a hundred feet above the spot where the interview between the card-sharp and the sister of the Cinnabar mine-owner had taken place.

Attracted by the sound of voices they had crept forward and witnessed the latter part of the meeting.

Too far off to overhear the conversation they could only judge of the nature of the interview by the actions.

Bertrand Redan had seen enough to enable him to guess only too well the meaning of this stolen meeting afar from the town by the Shasta's bank.

The woman whom he had marked out for his own was already the prize of another man! The glorious Californian beauty, proud and haughty as the descendant of a long line of kings, had stooped to favor Dick Velvet—Velvet Hand, the card-sharp, the man who lived by his wits. He, of all men in the town of Cinnabar, to win the smiles of Blanche del Colma!

"By heaven, I would not have believed it if I had not witnessed it with my own eyes!" Redan exclaimed, in a state of great excitement.

"A sure enough fact!" Yuba tersely replied.

"The girl is mad to throw herself away upon such a fellow."

"I reckon that wimmen don't never trouble their heads much 'bout who or what the cuss is when he happens to catch 'em," Yuba sagely observed.

"I'll put a stop to it though, pretty quick!" Redan cried, abruptly and angrily.

Yuba looked astonished.

"What in thunder is it to you, anyway?"

"Maybe I want her myself."

"Sho!"

"Anyway I'll put a spoke in this fellow's wheel!"

"You'll have your hands full, old man, for he's a tearer."

"A shootist, eh?"

"Oh, yea, I bet yer! He's all bull-dog except his head and that's grizzly bear!"

"So much the better!" and Redan smiled, complacently.

"I reckon I don't savvy," Bill observed, doubtfully.

"Why, so much the more honor in cutting his comb," Redan explained. "The fellow is evidently in my way and he's got to get out of it. I'm not the man to let any miserable gambler step in between me and fortune."

"Sport, you will have a lively time!" Yuba declared, impressively.

"That remains to be seen," Redan returned in his cool way.

"In the first place, I'll keep my eyes upon the two for awhile, and then, if the strong suspicion which I now entertain that the fellow is in my way is confirmed, I'll take measures to upset his apple-cart."

"Old man! he's a hummer now, I tell yer!" Yuba exclaimed, solemnly. "Why, he war ready to fite the hull darned town this morning, an' all for a John. We wanted to hang the yaller cuss, an' this velvet sharp steps in an' durn my cats! ef he didn't back us all down."

"He skeered you, eh?"

"Right he did! an' he meant fite, too, all the time. I ain't no douch, an' I'm jest as brave a man as you kin find clear from hyer to Oregon till I meet another galoot that kin hang himself better than I kin."

"And such a man you take this velvet chap to be, eh? and Redan's lip curled in contempt as he put the question.

"Right you are ag'in! I'm a reg'lar old sockdologer of a b'ar, I am! I'm anybody's meat but the man's wot kin make meat outen me; then I draw out; I ain't ridin' in funerals as much as I was."

"I'll give Cinnabar City a chance for a first-class funeral if this Dick Velvet comes prowling over my hunting-grounds!" and Redan spoke with fierce emphasis.

"All right, sport; I'll be on hand; but I say, hump yourself lively when you commence the fun, for this chap is lightning on the jump, they say."

The superintendent laughed contemptuously and then the two proceeded toward Cinnabar.

When they reached the bend in the road, whence the way was straight to the town, they could distinguish plainly the well proportioned form of the velvet sharp striding along in the distance.

"If you'll take my advice, sport," said Yuba to his companion as they walked toward the mining village, "you'll go slow in this matter, an' ef it does come to grabbing fur the under-grip jes' do it by proxy, you know; git some other pilgrim 'to lay him out fur you. There's plenty of men in the town that hev been huckin' 'g'in' bad luck till they're clean broke an' ready to jump at any chance to make a stake. Go fur some of 'em; let 'em lay in wait fur this sharp an' knock fits outen him some dark night; it will cost you something, but it's a heap sight the best way. That's the lead I'd foller," he added, emphatically.

"Well, every man to his own game," Redan observed, quietly. "That sort of thing might work with you but it wouldn't suit me at all. I'll just wait for awhile and see how the land lies, and then if I find out that he is going to interfere with me, I'll settle him, or he shall settle me."

"Go in; root hog or die!" exclaimed Yuba.

"I don't usually call for aid until my own resources fail."

By this time the two had reached the town and with a parting salutation they separated, Yuba making a bee-line for the nearest saloon, and the superintendent continuing on down the street toward the Cinnabar works.

"Fernando must know of this meeting," Redan mused as he walked along. "It will touch his haughty Spanish pride to the very quick to know that his sister has condescended to give secret interviews to this gambler. Fernando is thick enough with him, too, but that will make the smart all the greater, for he will believe that the fellow has presumed to woo Blanche on account of his intimacy with him. Engage bravos, eh, Yuba! Oh, no! I know a trick worth two of that. Fernando del Colma shall be the cat's-paw to pull my chestnuts out of the fire. I know his nature as well as though I were his brother. He is rash, hot-headed, impetuous; a few words from me will set his blood into a flame; he is always armed; he will rush forth at once in search of this velvet sharp and will either kill him or be killed; either way I make my point. If the gambler is removed the only rival I have to fear is disposed of; if Del Colma dies why then Cinnabar City will be too hot to hold Mister Dick Velvet and he will be compelled to fly for his life. And Fernando dead, the mine falls at once into my grip, and Blanche, bereft of her natural protector, most certainly will cling closely to me. Why, I don't see how I can fail to win every point!"

No common trickster was Bertrand Redan but a master-hand in craft. One must play well and watch the game sharp to beat him in the rubber of life.

Entering the little building which served as an office for the works, Redan found Del Colma.

CHAPTER XVI.

FIRING THE MINE.

THE Californian was extended at full length upon the buffalo-rope which was still spread upon the cracker-boxes, thus forming a sort of a couch. His generally disordered appearance, blood-shot eyes and listless demeanor told plainly of the night's dissipation.

It was the first meeting that day between the owner of the Cinnabar lode and the superintendent, and Bertrand's practiced eye saw at once that Fernando had been making a "night of it" and was considerably the worse for it.

"Good-morning. Were you at it again last night?" Redan asked, seating himself upon a keg near the door; articles of furniture were scarce in the Cinnabar office.

"Yes," the Californian answered, gloomily.

"And how was the luck?"

"Satan himself was in the cards!"

"You lost?"

"Yes."

"Heavily?"

"Yes, very heavily," and then a deep sigh came from Fernando's lips.

"Who were you playing with?"

"Velvet Hand."

"You generally play with him, I believe?"

"Yes."

"And he generally wins?"

"Yes," and again the Californian sighed.

"He is a very skillful player, I have heard."

"Yes, very skillful."

"And not always honest, either?"

Del Colma lifted his heavy eyes and looked with amazement into Redan's face; he did not clearly understand the meaning of the superintendent's words.

"How not honest?"

"Why, he sometimes helps luck by holding good hands," Redan replied, bluntly.

"You mean to say that he cheats?"

"Yes."

The Californian shook his head.

"You don't believe it, eh?"

"No."

"And yet he always wins when you play with him?"

"He is a better player than I; I lack judgment. I lose my temper and play hotly—foolishly. He, on the contrary, always plays carefully; besides, he does not seem to care whether he wins or loses—"

"And Fortune is a fickle jade, eh! and like a woman favors the man who is indifferent to her favors."

"It seems so sometimes," replied Del Colma, in a melancholy tone.

"That mortgage is due pretty soon, isn't it?" Redan asked, carelessly.

"Yes, and where to raise the money to meet it I know not."

"Why, I thought that you had made arrangements to get the money from Frisco."

"Eight thousand dollars only; I still lack two of the amount."

"Ten thousand, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"But, even supposing that you can't raise the odd two thousand the parties will give you time?"

"No, not a day; they are anxious to get the mine in their hands, for they think that there is money in it, although, so far, I have not succeeded in making much out of it."

"It is improving every day, though."

"True, but not enough to enable me to tide over this crisis," Fernando replied, gloomily. "According to the terms of the loan I must give up the mine within ten days if I do not meet the payment; then it will be sold by the sheriff, and, as the chances are that it will not fetch over six or seven thousand dollars, money is so tight and the reputation of the mine so bad, I shall be ruined."

"Not a very bright outlook, is it?"

"No."

"By the way, you might borrow the couple of thousand that you lack from this Velvet Hand," Redan observed.

A glance of fire shot from the dark eyes of the Californian.

"What! do you think that I would ask a favor of such a man?" Del Colma cried.

Redan affected to be astonished.

"Why, what is the matter with him?"

"A common gambler!"

"Oh, yes, I forgot his profession; and, by the way, speaking of that, don't you think that it is rather imprudent for your sister to meet this fellow privately on the outskirts of the town?"

With a single bound Del Colma was on his feet, his face dark, rage in every feature.

"What do you say?" he exclaimed, hoarsely.

"Is it possible that you didn't know that Blanche was acquainted with him?" Redan demanded, pretending astonishment.

"Acquainted with him, the villain!" cried the Californian, hot with rage. "By my soul, if I caught them together I'd kill the fellow on the spot!"

"It's lucky for him then that you wasn't with me a little while ago," Bertrand replied. "I was coming from Angel's Bar and on the road met Yuba Bill, and just as we came to where the Bar trail joins the main road our attention was attracted by the sound of voices, male and female; we rather wondered at it, for women are not over plentiful in this region, and so we quietly came forward to see who the parties were. The man was this Velvet Hand—"

"And the woman—the woman was my sister!" cried Fernando, fiercely.

"The woman was your sister, Blanche?"

"Impossible! your eyes must have deceived you!"

"Oh, no, there is no mistake about the matter," the superintendent replied, firmly. "I was quite near enough to see her face distinctly, and, even if I had been further off, the spotted mustang which the woman rode would easily have identified her, for there isn't another horse like it in this section."

"Possibly it was a chance meeting only," Del Colma said, after a few moments of thought. "I cannot bring myself to believe that my sister, within whose veins runs as good blood as any Californian family can boast, would so far forget her station as to meet this common blackleg alone and in secret."

"Fernando, I say nothing but what I know," Bertrand said, earnestly, and with an appearance of great frankness. "I distinctly saw your sister in conversation with this Velvet Hand on the outskirts of the town. She was on horseback, he on foot. It did not seem to be a chance meeting, for when it was ended she galloped back to town and he followed slowly after. I was not near enough to overhear the conversation, but it was a very earnest one, and at its close Velvet Hand gave your sister something. I wasn't close enough to see what it was, but I distinctly saw her carry it to her lips and kiss it, and from that I naturally judged that it was some pledge of affection."

A ringing curse came from the lips of the enraged brother.

"Oh, would I had been there!" he cried. "The wretch! to dare to lift his eyes to my sister, and she—she must be mad! Is it possible that she has repulsed the love of so many worthy gentlemen to give at last her virgin affection to this gambler—this blackleg who lives by cards, and who in a civilized world would be driven out of all decent society? Oh, no! I cannot believe it, and yet what explanation can be given of this secret meeting except the natural inference which you have drawn?"

Bertrand shrugged his shoulders but made no other answer.

Then Del Colma sat down abruptly upon the rude couch, drew

North his revolvers and carefully examined the charges, fresh capped them and then thrust them back in their holsters.

The superintendent watched these warlike preparations with a calm face, but with a satisfied mind.

"Now I'll have a few words with the scoundrel!" the Californian exclaimed, rising and striding toward the door. "If he has dared to raise his eyes to my sister let him make his peace with Heaven, for he is not long for this world!"

CHAPTER XVII.

SIMENA'S STORY.

NIGHT had come, and the silver moon, round as the shield of a dusky warrior, hung high in the heavens, shedding a soft flood of silvery light over the city of Cinnabar.

Gigantic shadows the shanties of the town cast, grotesque and peculiar.

The cottage which Del Colma had erected on the Cinnabar property, stood just within the line where once the old stockade wall had run, extending in a semicircle from bluff to bluff, all around the claim.

Only a few moss-grown stumps now remained to show where the wall had formerly stood.

Attached to the cottage was a little garden, wherein the careful hand of the girl, with true womanly grace, had planted wild-flowers, gathered here and there during her rambles in the foothills near the town.

A lofty pine, which the woodman's hand had spared, stood just on the outskirts of the garden, and by its trunk a rude bench had been constructed.

By the tree-trunk sat Blanche del Colma, and, reclining on a huge stone near by, busily engaged in knitting one of those gay-colored scarfs, so common to the Mexican race, was the lady's waiting-maid, a rather pert, pretty-faced half-Indian, half-Mexican girl, by name Zimena.

Blanche had been engaged in thoughtful meditation, watching the beauty of the night, and enjoying the grandeur of the rugged mountain scenery, so oddly set forth by the light of the moon.

Zimena had been chatting away, merrily, and parrot-like, about a hundred different things; full of life and vivacity was the peon girl.

"And so you do not find it lonesome here?" the mistress said, taking advantage of a declaration of how charming a place she thought Cinnabar City to be, made by Zimena, to ask the question.

"Lonely! Oh, no, senorita!" the girl cried, instantly. "It is so lively, so gay here, so many houses, so many people! Why, senorita, if you remember, at the hacienda in the south, we saw only our neighbors; here we can see strangers every day."

The lady would not have wondered why the girl thought Cinnabar City to be so gay if she had known that the cunning peon maid was in the habit of stealing out of the house now and then to take part in a sort of fandango, held generally on Sunday evenings, at a Mexican saloon in the lower part of the town. Quite cosmopolitan in its character was the young metropolis of the Shasta valley. No churches, as yet, but plenty of saloons.

"It seems lonesome to me, for of the many faces I see, but few appear to be familiar; all strangers, no Californians."

"Why, senorita, what difference does it make if they are only agreeable?" cried the girl, in her pert way. "At home I had admirers, but none so gallant and nice as the Americans I have here."

"Ah, you have an admirer—a lover, then?" Blanche asked, curiously, interested, woman-like, in affairs of the heart.

The girl simpered, attempted to blush and look confused, but not being by nature one of the blushing kind, made a sad failure of it.

"Oh, senorita, I don't know as I ought to call him a lover, because he has never said much to me with his tongue, although with his eyes he has said enough," the girl confessed.

"How did you happen to make his acquaintance?" Blanche asked.

"Oh, senorita, it was just like a romance—like one of the old Spanish stories that Father Anselmo used to tell us!" Zimena exclaimed, enthusiastically.

"A romance?"

"Yes, senorita; it was just after dark one evening, and I had been to Senor Pollock's store for some article"—which was all a downright falsehood, for it was near midnight, and she was returning from the Mexican fandango which we have before mentioned—"and as I came along the street I met some of the horrid miners; those ruffians, senorita, who come from the mountain gulches, and wear red shirts and big boots—great, ugly, hump-whiskered monsters!" and the girl's eyes snapped and dilated as she described the peculiarities of the gulch pilgrims. "It was quite dark, and I was alone"—not exactly truth this statement, for she had been accompanied by a cavalier, a Mexican of uncertain character, who had incontinently taken to his heels upon encountering the jolly crowd of miners—"and these great, rude men surrounded me. 'Hillo!' cried one big monster, 'if it ain't a gal!' 'W'ar yer goin', little one!' said another."

"And what did you say?" asked Blanche, deeply interested in the tale, and wondering at the boldness of the men, not having the slightest suspicion that the scene which the girl was describing with so much vivacity had taken place, not in the early evening, but close upon midnight—an hour when the presence of a woman alone in the streets of a great city would excite remark, let alone in a mining camp.

"Why, senorita, of course, I at once told them who I was, and begged them to let me pass." Another falsehood this statement, for the girl had not dared to confess who she was for fear of the circumstance coming to the ears of Del Colma, a result which, as she well knew, would be followed by her instant dismissal from his service.

"And did they?"

"Oh, no, senorita, the brutes! They declared that I must pay toll."

"Pay toll?"

"Yes, senorita; I must kiss each one of the ugly monsters."

The cheeks of the lady crimsoned at the idea.

"But just as they began to stretch out their hands to lay hold of me, a tall, handsome gentleman came rapidly up, and stepped in between. 'Take care what you are about,' he said; 'this lady is under my protection, and I'll trouble you to let her go on her way in peace.'"

"And did they?"

"Yes; but they wasn't going to, until one of them seemed to recognize the gentleman, and then he said, 'Well, king-pin of the Occidental gang, seeing as how it is you, we'll let her slide, but you'll have to stand treat,' and then the gentleman said, 'all right,' and told me to run along home."

"And so your adventure ended?"

"Yes, senorita, although I have seen him a great many times since, and he always lifts his hat to me as politely as if I were a princess, and yesterday he was on the hillside—just up there, senorita," and the girl pointed to the beginning of the foothills, about a hundred yards off, as she spoke, "and I watched him for near an hour."

"And what was he doing there?"

"Nothing, senorita, except looking down here."

"Perhaps he was looking for you?"

"Yes, senorita, that was what I thought; and I hurried out as soon as I could, but he was gone."

"Do you know his name?"

"No, senorita; but I can easily find out, for he wears such an odd suit, all velvet."

Blanche looked astonished; but the girl was so busy talking that she did not notice the expression of amazement so plainly written upon the face of her mistress.

"And he such a handsome gentleman!" she continued; "he always looks so nice!"

And here a sudden stop was put to the girl's chatter by a hasty summons from the aged housekeeper from within the cottage.

Zimena fled, leaving Blanche to her own thoughts.

And so Velvet Hand—for the Californian girl easily recognized the velvet sharp by the description—was the lover of her waiting maid!

The proud lip of the girl curled in contempt.

"And he seemed like a gentleman too—like one far above in station the rest of these rude, wild men. These Americans are all alike! There is no nobility of soul among them!"

The girl fell into a deep meditation—a meditation from whence she was suddenly aroused.

Forth from the shadow of the pine tree stepped a dark form.

A single glance, and Blanche saw that it was an Indian maid who confronted her.

Frowning was the dusky face, and savage the expression of the eyes.

"Hula-ha-ha has traveled far from the home of her people to look upon the face of the pale beauty who has won the heart of the great velvet chief!" the Indian maid declared.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE RIVALS.

BLANCHE had started to her feet surprised by the sudden and unexpected appearance of the forest daughter, but astonished as she had been by the sight of the girl she was still more astonished by her strange speech.

The great velvet chief!

And who was he, if not Velvet Hand!

"You are fair; the Water-bird does not wonder that the chief cares for you," the girl continued, slowly and sadly.

"Who are you, and why do you come to me?" Blanche demanded.

"Hula-ha-ha is a daughter of the McClouds. She comes to the lodges of the white men so that she may look upon the face of the pale woman who has stolen the velvet chief away. She is satisfied; she will go back to her people now and tell them that it is useless to try to win the velvet chief from the whites. The pale woman is too fair; he will never leave her."

"And what have I to do with the velvet chief?" cried Blanche, her cheeks crimsoning.

"Everything," the Indian girl replied, slowly; "for your sake he forgets and forgives. Many wrongs have the false white men heaped upon him; once he owned this valley—the little cave where they dig the yellow metal—the ground whereon we stand, all was his. His false brothers cheated him out of it, and then he fled to the lava rocks and the wild pines, and became the great chief of the Shasta tribe. He wrote his totem in blood here by the river many moons ago; he drove the false white men from the land which they had stolen and burnt their lodges. All here is his if he chooses to claim it. The red McClouds offered him their warriors; I, the Water-bird, the daughter of Koo-choo, the Hog, would have become his squaw; all the yellow metal in the mountains would have been his, but he would have none of it for

the love that he bears you. He forgives the bad white men who stole his land away; he forgets the blood of the warlike Shastas, shed like water in his behalf; your face has been big medicine to him; the daughter of the red McClouds will go back to her people and tell them that it is useless for them to attempt to take the great velvet chief from the white lodges."

Blanche listened in utter bewilderment to this speech. What had impressed the girl with the belief that she exerted such an influence over the Velvet Hand? And, what manner of man was he, in truth? From the Indian girl's recital he had in the past acted the part of a hero, and yet at present he was apparently playing the lover to her waiting-maid, the peon girl.

"Why do you couple my name with that of the man whom you call the great velvet chief?" the Californian girl asked, her eyes flashing and her bosom heaving. "I have never met him but once in all my life; he is almost a total stranger to me!"

"Did not the Water-bird see the meeting between you to-day by the river?" the Indian girl replied. "Is the daughter of the McClouds blind that she cannot detect the light of love in the eyes of the man for whom she would give her heart's blood, drop by drop? For your sake the great velvet chief refused the offers of my father—for your sake he will dwell here in the white lodges, a common brave only, when by right he should be chief over all. Hula-ha-ha is satisfied now; she will go back to her people and tell them that while the pale squaw lives the great velvet chief will not desert the white village."

And then, shrouding herself in her blanket the girl stalked away, disappearing as suddenly and as unceremoniously as she had appeared, leaving the Californian girl a prey to bewildering thoughts.

The Indian maid had plunged into the scrubby timber bordering the foot-hills, and had been lost to sight almost immediately in the dark shadows.

Blanche hardly knew what to think of this strange interview.

It was plainly evident that the dusky maid fully believed that she spoke the truth when she declared that but for her, Blanche, the velvet chief would have joined fortunes with the red braves, the masters of the lava rocks and the great northern wilderness, but the thought was folly! What was she to him, or he to her? If he came near the cottage at all it was to woo the waiting-maid, Zimona, and the proud beauty smiled in scorn at the thought.

The night was growing apace; she turned to enter the house, and was amazed to behold a tall, dark form advancing slowly around the corner of the cottage.

It was an Indian—a brawny chief wrapped up closely in a ragged blanket.

He ducked his head gravely upon perceiving that he was recognized, and uttered the salutation so common to the half-civilized red-man of the West.

"How!"

The girl, well used to the Indians from early childhood, perceived at a glance that this brawny brave was no Californian savage; no red-skin west of the Rocky Mountain range ever boasted such a build.

Upon the appearance of the chief the thought that he was a companion of the girl naturally occurred at once to the senorita, and the Indian soon put that idea to flight.

"Bad squaw—McCloud girl," he said, gravely, nodding his head in the direction taken by the Indian maid. "Chief watch her come—think mebbe she do bad—keep eye on her, you bet, bully boy!"

Blanche then understood that the red-man was claiming to act as a protector.

"Do you know her?" she asked.

"Mebbe yes—not much bad egg! no good McCloud but dead McCloud! Chief see her come—see her creep like wild-cat—think, mebbe, she mean bad—chief 'ante' up too; she no 'paas,' he 'come in'—all good white men say chief old, tough son-of-a-gun!"

This was the most peculiar savage that the girl had ever seen.

"What tribe is the chief?" asked Blanche, curious to know from whence he came.

"Blackfoot—tribe fur off—many sleeps away. O-wa-he is a great chief among his people—like white braves too; white chiefs call him Mud-turtle."

The girl had never encountered a member of the Blackfoot nation before, and therefore it was no wonder that she did not recognize the stranger's nation.

"Chief hungry," continued the brave, impressively; "like grub—much grub, mebbe—s'pose white squaw gives chief fodder, he watch—see that bad McCloud squaw no come back."

"Certainly; come with me."

Blanche conducted the red-man into the kitchen where his arrival produced quite a sensation among the servants.

Bidding the housekeeper provide a substantial meal for the red-man, the girl withdrew to the privacy of her own apartment, there to meditate in solitude over the strange events of the day.

Mud-turtle had astonished the servants by his enormous appetite, and the wonderful command which he possessed over the miner's dog common to the mountain region.

When the housekeeper, an aged dame of uncertain temper, told him that he was as big as an elephant, and could eat as much, he replied placidly that the statement was "too thin," and that she had better "walk off on her ear."

And then, when the hostler of the establishment, a wily little Mexican, took a fancy to a peculiar tobacco-pouch which the Indian wore, about the only thing really that was of much value that the chief possessed, and expressed a wish to purchase it, the Indian whipped out a deck of dirty cards from some hidden recess and offered to play a game of poker, the Mexican to stake a certain sum of money against the article.

Now, as the hostler rather prided himself upon his skill with cards, he gladly accepted the challenge, but the nimble-fingered Sanchez was a very bungler compared to the stolid savage, for cheat as outrageously as the Mexican could, the chief cheated still better, and within half an hour Sanchez had lost every valuable that he possessed.

And then, as if sighing for new worlds to conquer, the savage folded his blanket around him and stole away, his stomach full and his pockets well lined, thanks to the hostler's desire to possess the tobacco-pouch.

CHAPTER XIX.

LET UP, OLD MAN.

THE dusk of the evening shades was falling fast upon the town of Cinnabar. The miners were beginning to pour into the town, fresh from the mountain gulches and the toils of the day; the saloons were beginning to freshen up and prepare for business, for it is by night only that the saloon in the mining town does much trade; like some huge beast of prey it slumbers while the sun is high.

Velvet Hand had just finished his supper in the restaurant of the Occidental, and was posing himself outside the hotel, leaning against the corner of the building, trimming his nails with the little pearl-handled knife, ever his constant companion.

Like the saloon-keeper's the gambler's trade thrived only by night, and the keen-eyed Velvet Hand was waiting for the coming of the Californian in order to indulge in their nightly encounter at the card-table.

"He can't possibly keep on at this rate much longer," Velvet Hand mused, in meditation, talking to himself after the fashion of men who make few friendships. "At the rate he is going on, the earnings of the richest lode in California wouldn't supply the dust, and I know that the mine is not doing much; and then, when he is shaken out, who will stand between me and mine? At last the Cinnabar lode will come back to me; not that I care to work it myself, for there are too many unpleasant memories connected with the spot, but no other man shall make money out of it. And when his grip is forced from the mine, what then?—what is there left for him—and for her? Ah! these women are always in the way."

"My lord dook!" cried a hoarse voice, close to the ear of the meditating man, "kin I b'lieve me eyes, or kin I not? Am I dreamin', or is this a wakin' hour, when things air as they seem an' whisky is not?"

Turning, Velvet Hand beheld the person of the redoubtable bummer, the veteran, Joe Bowers.

"How air ye, me noble dook!" continued the vagabond, ducking his head in graceful salutation. "Velvet Hand, ole pard, how goes it?"

"Well, what do you want?" the sharp asked, abruptly, and with considerable asperity in his tone.

"Ye're jist ole business, every time, ain't ye?" Mr. Bowers exclaimed, in unbounded admiration. "Ah, pard! I reckon that you ain't changed much, though you hev shaved off that big beard an' h'isted on the velvet toga. Now, by Saint Patrick! you look bully!"

Velvet Hand surveyed the bummer for an instant, a peculiar expression upon his face, and the vagabond, quick to read a man's thoughts in his face, saw that the sharp was uncertain how to receive him.

"As a friend, mighty satrap!" he hastened to exclaim. "I'm with yer, tooth and toe-nail! Glad air these aged eyes that they look one't ag'in upon yer noble face, an' if you feel inclined to stand the drinks for the sake of old times, I'm yer man. Never be it said that ole Joe Bowers refused to h'ist with a friend!"

"A friend, eh?" quoth Velvet Hand, doubtfully: "well now I am not really certain that I am a friend of yours or that you are a friend of mine."

"Not certain, me lord!" Joe Bowers exclaimed, pathetically. "Oh! kin I b'lieve me own two hookin' ears—kin I trust the eye-sight of me smellers? Oh, rocks! think on the old time, when in cahoots we bucked ag'in' Kentuck's game an' bu'sted his consarn. Mebbe it wasn't a man about my size who warned you when the Egyptians came down 'like a wolf on the fold! Oh, no! it was the man around the corner! The original Joe Bowers war not to the front! Who played ghost in the Cinnabar lode and kept the miners out'n it, eh? Was it me or some other Lard?"

"You think you know me?"

"Most noble dook! you kin bet ducats onto it!" cried Bowers, solemnly. "I knowed yer the moment I set me peepers on yer although I give you me word as a white man that I had an idea that you had quit the game and 'cashed in your checks' long ago."

"I guess I'm still in the flesh," the sharp quietly returned.

"Well now, I reckon that you air!" the bummer protested, admiringly. "I'd like to see the galoot that sed you wasn't; he'd be my meat, or else my name ain't Joe Bowers! Say! air you still keepin' yer eye on the Cinnabar strike?"

"Why do you ask such a question?" Velvet Hand inquired.

"What is the Cinnabar mine to me?"

"Tain't as deep as a well nor as wide as a church door, but 'tis enough," replied the bummer, in his ridiculous theatrical way. "Rocks, as I sed a min'ite ago, I reckoned that you hac quit the game long ago, an' I constituted myself your heir."

"Indeed! is that so?"

"True as preachin', me noble dook; as you had lost yer grip on the Cinnabar lode, I reckoned that I could ap's on my hands and wade in."

"Who do you think I am?" asked the sharp, suddenly.

"Oh, I know yer like a book!" the bummer ejaculated, with a series of knowing winks. "You can't fool this old coon much, I tell yer! Your handle is Dick Velvet—now Velvet Hand—but I knew yer name was Richard something else, and then ag'in when Cherokee was to the fore, an' I reckon thar's a few men in this town that would tremble even now ef somebody was to bowl out that the Death Shot of Shasta war round, but I won't give it away; wild elephants couldn't tear the thing from me! I'm your man, I am, an' I jest come to you now to say fair and aquar', ef so be as how you've got your eyes on the Cinnabar mine, to let up, old man, an' g'n me a show fur my white alley!" Velvet Hand had listened with astonishment to the latter part of this speech.

"What have you to do with the Cinnabar mine?" he asked.

"Why, I've got a leetle rake in thar," Bowers explained.

"How so? I don't understand; you don't mean to say that you have any share in Del Colma's speculation?"

"Oh, no, not at all, but he's about played out, an' when he quits my pardner jumps in," Bowers explained. "You hear me, noble lord: it was all through me that this Californian came to invest in the mine at all. I knowed that it was a good thing, richer'n thunder if the right vein is ever struck ag'in, an' struck it will be one of these days, you kin bet yer boots on it! Well, thar was an old pard of mine, a high-toned chap, jest the cuss to work sich a thing, an' I—thinkin' that you were played for good as I sed afore—told him of the Cinnabar strike, an' he b'listed Del Colma in, fur he had the rocks to start things—"

"If I understand your plan correctly, you intend to 'h'ist' Del Colma out!" Velvet Hand abruptly interrupted.

"That is our little game; but, as I sed afore I had no idee that you were ever comin' to the fore ag'in, an' so, ole pard, I says to you, fair an' easy, let up, old man, if so be as you're goin' for the Cinnabar strike, an' lemme git my little rake outen it!" Bowers exclaimed, imploringly.

"I couldn't think of it," Velvet Hand replied, in his softest manner.

"No!" cried Bowers, in tragic accents.

"No, not by a jugful!"

"You're goin' to run the thing yourself?"

"That is what I intend to do; maybe I may not be able to make the rifle, though," the sharp suggested. "You can take a hand against me if you like; the game is an open one, you know."

"Me noble dook, I seek not sudden death!" Mr. Bowers exclaimed, loftily. "Oh, no buck ag'in' you, nary time, this chile will not, I draw out!"

"Are you for or against me?"

"For you, every time—unwonted gold you kin bet onto that!" the bummer responded, promptly. "I reckoned that, mebbe, you might not be willing to see the Cinnabar consarn tossed round like a football, an' I made up my mind to hev a talk with you afore I took another kick at it. I 'pass'—count me out. Yer name is Velvet Hand—you bet; I never knowed you by any other, I savvey. Say, kin you trust me fur a dollar?"

The sharp silently placed a five-dollar gold-piece in his hand, and Mr. Bowers departed in high spirits. There was trouble ahead he was sure, and in troublous times he thrived.

CHAPTER XX.

THE CALIFORNIAN MEETS HIS MASTER.

VELVET HAND watched the bummer swagger off with a quiet smile.

"That fellow has been of use in the past and may be so in the future," he murmured in meditation. "So there is another party after the mine, eh! That is a bit of information worth knowing. It was cheap at five dollars, and who is it? Am I wresting the mine from the Californian that another may step in and enjoy it? Oh, no! whoever the party is he will find that when I shake it out of the hand of the Californian it will drop into my paw and I'll hold it with a grip of iron; neither man nor devil shall wrest it from me!"

But in the list of adversaries the iron-willed velvet sharp had not counted woman.

The figure of the Californian, striding up the street with a gloomy brow, interrupted Velvet Hand's meditations.

"Hallo! here comes my bird!" he muttered, "and out of sorts, too, if his face is any index to his mind. What brings him out so early? He is rarely abroad until after dark."

Del Colma marched straight up to Velvet Hand and the gamester noticed, to his astonishment, that his eyes were fairly flaming with anger.

He paid no attention to the friendly nod of the sharp, and it was quite plain that the Californian's errand was not a pleasant one.

"I want to speak with you a moment if you will have the kindness to follow me," Del Colma said, anger plainly visible in both face and voice.

"Lead on, sir, I am entirely at your service," the other replied, taking no notice whatever of the peculiar manner of the mine-owner.

Del Colma marched up the street, Velvet Hand following close at his heels, until they were fairly beyond the line of the town.

The gloom of the night was growing thicker and thicker, and yet there was still light enough for the two men to plainly distinguish each other's features.

The Californian looked carefully around him, saw that they were secure from observation and not likely to be interrupted, as they were some distance from the road.

"Now, then, sir, a few words with you?" he exclaimed, haughtily.

The manner if not the matter of the speech grated upon Velvet Hand's ears, and he felt strongly inclined to reply in kind; but, as he had not the slightest idea of how he could possibly have offended Del Colma, he restrained the impulse until he could learn the reason for the rude treatment, and so replied, quietly:

"As I said before, I am entirely at your service."

"Who are you and what am I?" Del Colma demanded.

"You are one man and I am another," Velvet Hand answered coolly.

"I am a native Californian, a descendant of a long line of Spanish nobles, whose blood is blue and who trace back to a kingly source!" Del Colma exclaimed, haughtily.

"What you say may be true for aught I know," Velvet Hand observed, almost contemptuously, "or for aught I care," he added, "but that you are any the better as a man for springing from such a race I deny. The Spanish nobles you speak of were a set of blood-thirsty robbers if history tells the truth, and no descendant of Hernando Cortez and his gang has any reason to boast of the fact."

"My race were the owners of all this land once!" the Californian cried, hot with rage at the aspersion cast upon the character of his ancestors, and yet unable to deny that the old conquerors had rather overstrained their power in dealing with the simple-hearted natives.

"Yes, your race stole it from the people of Montezuma and we North Americans wrested it from you, which simply proves we are the superior people!"

The Californian fairly ground his teeth in anger.

"Go on, go on!" he cried; "it is but right that you should make me mad with rage, you miserable gambler, for within the next ten minutes either I will kill you or you shall kill me!"

Velvet Hand looked astonished at this outburst of rage; he could hardly believe that his words could have provoked such a storm of passion.

"Oh, we are to fight, then," he said in his cool way. "With all my heart, only I should like to know what we are going to fight about."

"Oh, you know well enough!" the Californian cried, bitterness in his tone.

"Do I?" and there was considerable doubt visible in his voice as he put the question.

"Yes, we fight because I am a wretched native Californian and you are a noble North American; but, wretched as I am—the descendant of an old race fast dying out, melting away under the influence of your superior civilization—I spit upon and despise your people. There is nothing in common between us; the blood of the Californian and Anglo-Saxon can no more mix together than oil and water can mingle!"

"And so we must fight because we are of different races, eh?" Velvet Hand exclaimed, totally at a loss for an explanation of the Californian's fury.

"Yes, yes!" Del Colma cried, hastily. "I am fully aware of the honor which you intend to do me, but I cannot accept; I must kill you to prevent it. Come, sir, will you fight or must I spit in your face to heat your superior blood to the fighting point?"

"Oh, I wouldn't do that!" Velvet Hand cried, quickly, flaming into sudden anger, "for a fight wouldn't follow, but a murder, for I should kill you on the spot without giving you the slightest chance for your life."

"You kill me, you miserable thief!" Del Colma shrieked, excited beyond the bounds of endurance, and then lifting his hand he struck the Cinnabar sharp a violent blow in the face. In a second Velvet Hand sprung upon him. He wrenched the Californian from his feet as though he was but a child and forced him over flat upon his back, pressing his powerful knee upon Del Colma's chest; then he drew forth his glittering bowie-knife.

Del Colma was half-stunned by his sudden downfall but he had sense enough left to understand that he was utterly at the mercy of the man whom he had so wantonly provoked.

"Strike!" he cried, wild with impotent rage; "the blood of a degenerate nation may be in my veins, but I do not fear to die."

"Kill you, eh?" cried the victor, with a bitter smile; "oh, no, that is not my game. You called me a thief and now I'm going to brand you as a liar. Your life I'll spare but I'll put a mark upon you that will endure to your dying day! The letters L-I-A-R I'll carve on your forehead!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake spare me that!" fairly yelled Del Colma, white with rage and terror; "death rather—death I beg!"

"Why have you attacked and insulted me so grossly—a man who never injured you?"

"You, a gambler, would marry my sister! I know how you meet her in secret—how you gave her a love-token which she accepted!" hissed Del Colma, almost choking with rage.

"A love-token!" cried Velvet Hand, in astonishment. "Why, I never met your sister but once, and then I happened to stop her runaway horse after she and the saddle had parted company with the beast. And when she thanked me she saw the diamond ring gleaming on my finger—the ring which you gave me as a surety for the gaming debt you owe—her ring, which you had no business to thus dispose of. She, never suspecting the truth, instantly jumped to the conclusion that it had been lost, and found by me, and asked me if I had found it, and I—the poor, mean, miserable thief of a gambler—lied to the girl rather than tell her that her own noble brother had given me the ring as a security for a gambling debt."

"Is this truth?" Del Colma exclaimed, totally bewildered.

"Truth!" cried Velvet Hand, roughly; "do you want me to drive my knife through your throat and let out some of your hot blood that you use such ugly words?"

CHAPTER XXI

THE SUPERINTENDENT TRIES IT ON.

"PARDON me, senor, I know not what I say," Del Colma replied, humbly. The false position in which he had so stupidly placed himself had completely tamed his wildness.

Velvet Hand returned his knife to its sheath, and removing his knee from the chest of the prostrate man, rose to his feet.

Del Colma slowly followed.

It had grown so dark that the two men could just about distinguish each other's faces and that was all.

"Senor, I owe you an apology," the Californian said, slowly, and with evident reluctance.

"Oh, don't trouble your head about it," Velvet Hand replied; "we'll call the matter square as it stands. But who is it that told you this tale—who is that put it into your head to attack me?"

"No one," the Californian answered, slowly.

"Some one witnessed the interview between your sister and myself?"

"Yes."

"And that some one told you that it was a love-meeting?"

"Yes."

"It was no friend of mine."

"I do not know."

"It is very evident to me that it was not. Of course the party, whoever it was, knew that the story of the meeting, told in such a way—represented as a secret love-meeting between your sister and myself, would most certainly lead to a quarrel between us—possibly to the death of one or, perhaps, both of us."

"That is likely."

"And this man, whoever he is, is an enemy of mine, and no friend to you, either, Del Colma, or else he would not have exposed you to the chance of death. He evidently desires to do me a mischief, and has used you as a cat's-paw to pull his chestnuts out of the fire."

"Oh, no," and the Californian shook his head; "he fully believed the story he told. He saw the meeting between you and Blanche at a distance; he did not overhear any of the conversation, but saw that you gave her some trinket, and that she carried it to her lips and kissed it. What else could he think but that it was a love token, given by you to her?"

"I shall have to hunt up this gentleman who takes such an interest in my affairs," Velvet Hand observed, quietly, yet with menace in his calm tones. "And, Fernando del Colma, this ends our acquaintanceship. You owe me a certain sum of money, that paid, we will be as strangers to each other. I am a gambler but 'tis merely because the excitement of the card-table keeps me alive; I have nothing else to live for, but I never urge any one to play with me, as you well know. You have grossly insulted me this evening, and I have spared the life you forfeited, but I don't intend that you shall ever have the chance to repeat the operation. In regard to your sister and myself, as I have said, I have never met her but once, and I should never seek to win her or any other woman unless they knew fully and exactly what I am; but, knowing that, if they choose to care for me, a hundred brothers should not keep me from the lady. Good-evening, sir."

And then Velvet Hand walked off in the darkness, leaving the Californian in a very unpleasant state of mind.

Del Colma watched the tall figure of the Cinnabar sharp until it disappeared in the gloom; then slowly and sadly he returned to the town, and just as he came to the Occidental he encountered Redan, who was lounging about the front of the hotel. It was quite evident that the superintendent had been waiting to learn the result of the interview between the Cinnabar sport and the owner of the mine.

"Well, you have seen him?" Redan inquired anxiously.

"Yes."

"I thought that you had missed him in some way; for he just entered the hotel."

"Yes!"

"You did not quarrel, then, for I see that neither one of you shows signs of damage?"

Del Colma evaded the question. It was not pleasant to relate the particulars of the contest wherein he had come out second best.

"He explained the matter satisfactorily."

"Indeed!" and Redan threw a strong expression of contempt into the single word.

"Yes; there is no love-affair between him and Blanche."

"Of course he swore there wasn't!" Full of contemptuous unbelief was the sentence.

"No, he did not swear; but he explained everything to my satisfaction."

"I'm afraid that you have allowed this fellow to fool you."

"Oh, no; I know how the matter really stands. That is all; good-night!"

And the Californian passed on, leaving Redan a prey to sullen rage.

"I cannot understand it," he muttered. "I thought I knew both of them too well for my plan to fail; but it is evident that Velvet Hand smoothed the matter over and managed in some way to satisfy Del Colma. No love-affair between them! Then I'm no judge of a woman's eye! I must take a hand in this matter, myself. I can easily pick a quarrel with this gambler, and if we come to shooting-irons, and I hit him, all the law and order part of the town will be on my side."

"Aha! bully rook! I was arter you!" cried a hoarse voice, and the burly figure of the fat bummer, Joe Bowers, loomed into the circle of light in front of the hotel.

"Well, what do you want?" demanded Redan, not in the best humor possible.

"Pard, in regard to this hyer leetle Cinnabar mine affair," said the bummer, lowering his voice, mysteriously.

"Well?"

"I'm a-gwine to draw out."

"Draw out!" cried Redan, astonished.

"Yes, sir-ee, hoss-dy!" replied the bummer. "It is playin' me noble dook; we air down to the bed-rock, an' nary a ducat will we take outen it!"

"I don't understand."

"A kick is as good as a wink to a blind hoss, me noble and potential superintendent!" exclaimed Bowers, sagely. "Thar has a new man come up—a cuss who will run that Cinnabar lode, an' I ain't anxious to hev anything to do with it. I ain't tryin' fur chances now to ride in funerals as much as I was."

"I don't understand what you are driving at!" Redan exclaimed, roughly.

"Do I not express meself in fluid accents, me sportive tricks? Well, then, listen, while I a tale unfold! When the boss Californian is shaken out of the mine thar's another cuss stands ready to take hold, an' he's got an iron grip, me lord! I jist tell you when he puts out his paw, it's like old death a-reaching for 'em."

"And who is the man?"

"Here he is, inside the Occidental. Oh, he's a tearer now, I tell yer when he gets started!"

And Bowers conducted the superintendent to a window, and to the astonishment of Redan, pointed out Velvet Hand.

"And he is the man who is going to knock our little plan?" Redan queried.

"I bet yer! higher nor a kite! Oh, me noble dook, you kin go ducats onto that!"

"That remains to be seen," Redan observed, grimly.

"You kin experiment ef you like, but as fur me, I'm out. No leetle ducats of mine do you rope into that mine now; my shekels I will keep an', if you'll take the advice of a man who knows, you won't try to buck ag'in' that velvet sport unless you're tired of this hyer world; so long!" And Mr. Bowers marched off.

But Bertrand Redan's mind was made up. He had determined to have a talk with Velvet Hand on Blanche's account, and now having learned that the quiet sport was likely to interfere with his plans for gaining possession of the Cinnabar property, he was still more determined to run him out of the town. Therefore, when a few minutes later Velvet Hand left the hotel Redan accosted him.

CHAPTER XXII

CATCHING A TARTAR.

"WILL you step this way! I'd like to have a few minutes' conversation," the superintendent said.

"All right, sir," Velvet Hand replied.

Redan led the way to the corner of the hotel, just out of earshot of the loungers congregated by the front door of the Occidental, and then he commenced the attack.

"Probably you know who I am," he began.

"Probably I do," the sharp answered, not at all inclined to be pleased with the arrogant manner of the other.

"My name is Redan, and I am superintendent of the Cinnabar mine."

"I don't take the slightest interest, sir, in regard to your name or what occupation you may follow," Velvet Hand observed, in his cool way; he had already detected the hostile feeling of the other, and was fully prepared for war.

"I have explained to you who I am, sir, in order that you may understand why I speak as I am about to speak!" Redan exclaimed, beginning to lose his temper.

"Sir, I don't care two cents who you are or what you are going to say!" Velvet Hand retorted.

"Perhaps you will before I get through," Redan remarked, significantly.

"I'm open to bet you ten to one that I won't!"

"I'm not a gambler and I don't bet!" the superintendent replied, loftily.

Velvet Hand winced a bit; he fully understood the taunt, and he felt a strong inclination to pick a quarrel with the speaker at once, but then it was foreign to his nature to force a difficulty with any one, and, too, he could not understand why this man, a stranger to him, for he had never exchanged words with Redan before, should desire to put an affront upon him; he felt a little curious also to learn the reason for the strange proceeding.

"Well, then, if you don't bet we can't make the riddle, can we?"

"I'm going to speak to you in regard to a rather delicate matter, and I don't exactly know how to begin," Redan said, affecting a reserve which in truth he was far from feeling.

"The beginning is a good place," Velvet Hand suggested, quietly, "though you might try it in the middle, or tackle the end if you thought it would come easier."

The superintendent scowled. He saw that the cool Cinnabar sharp was poking fun at him. He hesitated for words; his anger was rising and he felt strongly inclined to take Velvet Hand by the throat; it was only by a great effort that he controlled himself; the time for violence had not yet arrived.

"I'm afraid that you are not disposed to receive this communication in the spirit in which I tender it," Redan said.

"Well, I don't know; it depends altogether upon what it is, I reckon," the sharp replied, reflectively. "I think that I can meet you half-way though, no matter how you come at me."

This was a defiance, quietly as it was given, and Redan understood it as such. He saw that he had better come to the point at once.

"I wish to speak to you in regard to a certain lady."

Velvet Hand was amazed and fully showed it in his face. It was only for a moment though, for his active mind, used to drawing inferences, quickly guessed the connection that Mr. Bertrand Redan had with a certain matter.

"A lady, eh?" quoth the sharp, reflectively, with the design of drawing the other on.

"Yes, and that lady is Miss Blanche del Colma."

"Ah, is that so?" and Velvet Hand's smile was "childlike and bland" as he looked the sullen-faced superintendent straight in the eye.

"I come to you as a friend to tell you that you had better give up all idea of that lady, because if you persist in your present course you will only get yourself into trouble."

"Into trouble, eh?" remarked the sharp, as quietly and as mildly as possible.

"Yes, and if you want to avoid trouble you had better let her alone in the future."

"Who says so?" demanded Velvet Hand, abruptly, but still very quietly.

"I do," replied the superintendent, roughly. Deceived by the manner of Velvet Hand, he began to believe that he had succeeded in making an impression upon him.

"Excuse the question, respected stranger, but what on earth have you got to do with this matter, anyway?" asked the sharp.

"I don't know that I care to satisfy your curiosity on that point," replied Redan, loftily.

"Oh, don't you?"

"No; I don't know why I should!"

"Oh, perhaps you hav'n't any interest in the matter at all, and you are only interfering in something that doesn't concern you in the least."

"If you keep on you will find out whether it concerns me or not!" Redan exclaimed, threateningly.

"Perhaps you want the lady yourself."

"Perhaps I do."

"And you fancy that I stand in your way, eh?"

"That is my business, sir, and not yours."

"Oh, I only asked for information," Velvet Hand responded, as quietly and as coolly as possible.

"Just you content yourself with keeping away from her, that's all."

"Who says so?"

"I say so!" Again the anger of the superintendent was rising; these frivolous words annoyed him.

"You are quite confident that I have been in pursuit of the lady?"

"Quite, sir."

"No use for me to attempt to deny the fact?"

"Not the slightest. I would sooner trust my eyes than your words."

"Oh!"

Just a single exclamation from the lips of Velvet Hand, but a world of meaning in it.

It was all plain to him now. This was the man who had played the spy upon the chance interview between the Californian girl and himself, and who had hastened to Del Colma with the tale, thereby leading the hot-headed Californian to attack him.

The sharp fully understood all now. This fellow wanted Blanche for himself; it was ten to one that he was the party to whom Joe Bowers had referred—the man who intended to wrest the Cinnabar mine from the weak Del Colma's hand. And this fellow—evidently a scamp and an adventurer—sneered at him, the card-player.

Velvet Hand resolved to bring matters to a focus at once.

"And who are you, anyway, that dare to interfere in my concerns?" the Cinnabar sharp cried, contemptuously. "You had better not poke your nose in other people's business or else you may get it pulled!"

Redan could hardly believe his ears when he listened to this bold defiance.

"Why, you infernal scoundrel!" he cried, mad with rage, doubling up his fist and shaking it in the face of the other, but more he did not do, for on the instant Velvet Hand, with his open palm, hit him a most terrific crack on the side of the face, so violent that it sounded like a pistol-shot, and the miner, not being braced to receive the blow, went reeling backward like a drunken man.

Redan's loud words had attracted the attention of the little crowd, lounging in front of the Occidental, and they had turned their attention to the two just in time to see the vigorous slap administered.

The superintendent recovered himself in a moment and thrust his hand behind him to draw his revolver.

Quick and yet not quick enough! for Velvet Hand, expecting the motion, was fully prepared for it.

Springing forward he dealt the superintendent a most terrible blow between the eyes which felled him as if he had been shot.

The bystanders ran to his aid, for he had been stunned by the blow; and when he recovered his senses, and it was fully five minutes before he did so, he seemed dazed and bewildered.

The crowd expected a first-class "shooting-match" immediately, but, to the surprise of all, Redan did not attempt to pursue the quarrel further, although Velvet Hand was leaning against a post evidently prepared for the fight, but the superintendent had evidently got enough for the time being, for without a word he turned and walked off down the street toward the mine, much to the disappointment of the anxious bystanders.

The superintendent had taken "water."

CHAPTER XXIII

WAITING FOR THE CONFLICT.

Of course the news of the affray between the Cinnabar sport and the superintendent of the mine soon spread around town and one and all "reckoned" that it would be "shootin' on sight" the first time that the two encountered each other.

Great was the astonishment of the good folks of the mining town too when they learned the particulars of the affray. That Velvet Hand should be able to "handle himself" so well—to use the common phrase—was a matter of great wonder.

That he was not excelled as a pistol-shot by any man in the town was well known and few of the townsmen doubted that the arrogant Redan had waked up the wrong passenger when he essayed to quarrel with the most skillful card-player in all the Shasta region.

Expectation then was on tiptoe after the news spread around, and there was not a place of public resort in the town without its little circle eagerly discussing the affair and waiting impatiently for the quarrel to be renewed.

That the superintendent would never be willing to "give it up so, Mr. Brown," everybody believed, although the gossips of the young metropolis were rather puzzled that Redan had not pushed the affray to a summary conclusion at once.

Various were the reasons assigned for the superintendent's withdrawal from the scene of action.

"Mebbe he wasn't heeled," one suggested.

"You see Velvet Hand had the 'drop' on him," another explained. "Arter he gi'n the sup't that crack atween the eyes he had his we'pon out to onc't, and if Redan had a-gone fur to draw his tool the sharp would have let daylight right through him, see?"

And this was the general opinion; taken at a disadvantage, the superintendent had hauled off for repairs, intending to renew the quarrel at a more favorable occasion.

But what the quarrel was about—why Redan and Velvet Hand should be at sword's point was a mystery to the entire town.

The two men were not even acquainted, and the loungers in front of the Occidental, who had witnessed the affair from the beginning to the end, were not able to explain how the matter had commenced, although more than one had guessed shrewdly at it.

Velvet Hand had won large sums of money from Del Colma, the Californian, the owner of the Cinnabar property; Redan was superintendent of the mine; the mine was not prospering; Redan had taken it upon himself to call Velvet Hand to account for winning Del Colma's money—had called him a cheat, some of the party insisted; almost ready to swear that they heard the epithet applied, so often does the imagination confuse the senses; Velvet Hand—no man's lackey—had promptly resented the insult by slapping the face of the insulter and had then administered the terrible blow which had so completely taken all the fight out of the miner.

"They'll have it out afore the night's over!" was the common declaration, and no one in the town dissented from the opinion.

And therefore the people in the various saloons were all on the alert, ready to rush out into the street on the instant that the warning was given that the two men were out in hostile array.

And in no better way can we show the drift of public opinion regarding this matter than by simply stating that the betting was five to one that Velvet Hand would plug the superintendent.

Joe Bowers, who was always to the fore whenever anything of this kind was going on, was wildly offering to bet twenty to one on Velvet Hand, but the solid men of the town looked askance at the greasy bummer, and no one accepted the banter.

The night drew on apace, but no ringing pistol-shots breaking the quiet of the hour told the watching town that Bertrand Redan and Velvet Hand had joined forces in mortal combat.

Velvet Hand was around town in his accustomed haunts as usual, but the tall figure of the superintendent appeared not to mortal eyes. In fine, he was conspicuous by his absence.

The hour of midnight arrived and the expected meeting had not taken place.

Quite a little crowd of loungers had collected in the saloon of the Occidental, believing that as that locality was the common resort of the card-sharp the hostile meeting would surely take place there if anywhere.

And Billy King, the affable proprietor of the hostelry, having recently fitted up the saloon with some expensive mirrors, "first-class Eastern style," quietly confided to his intimate friends his hope that the affray would be settled elsewhere, not that he wanted to interfere with any man's fun, but the freight on the glasses from Frisco up was enough to make an angel swear, and stray bullets were no respecters of property.

But as we have said the hour of twelve arrived and no Bertrand Redan appeared.

Velvet Hand consulted his watch, remarked that the hour was late and that he "reckoned" he would retire, then took his candle and marched for the door.

All within the room drew a long breath; with the disappearance of the sharp the suspense would be ended, and one bold youth, rendered desperate by curiosity, took it upon himself to question Velvet Hand.

"Say, mister, that was as putty a thing as I ever see'd!" he exclaimed. "How did it happen, anyway? I reckon he 'sulted you, didn't he?"

"Yes, sir," responded Velvet Hand, gravely, turning in the open doorway.

"That's what I reckoned!" cried the glib youth, eagerly. "what did he say?"

"Well, I don't mind telling you, provided that you keep it quiet," the sharp replied, sober as a judge.

"Oh, we won't mention it, honest!"

"He said I couldn't drink!"

And under cover of the roar of laughter drawn from the crowd, at the expense of the eager seeker after knowledge, Velvet Hand retired.

By daylight then the superintendent of the mine would seek to get square with the cool and hardy sharp.

But the morrow came and no Bertrand Redan was to be seen.

A couple of impatient souls, unable to restrain their curiosity, made it their business to visit the Cinnabar mine with the intent to interview the superintendent in regard to the matter.

Their curiosity was not gratified, for they found Del Colma only, and in answer to their question in regard to the whereabouts of the superintendent the Californian stated that he had been suddenly called out of town on business; and, furthermore, he had not any idea where Redan had gone or when he would be back.

And from the tenor of Del Colma's words the listeners gathered that he was not aware that there had been any trouble between his superintendent and Velvet Hand.

Eagerly then—as became men possessed of such an excellent story—they related how severely the iron-fisted sharp had handled Redan.

Del Colma listened in wonder; the cause of the quarrel was no mystery to him. Redan was in love with Blanche; he had suspected that for some time; the superintendent was jealous of Velvet Hand and had essayed to drive him from the town, and Del Colma, with the particulars of his own encounter with the steel-muscled sharp still fresh in his memory, could clearly understand how Redan had been so easily discomfited.

The superintendent had evidently left town unwilling to show the marks of Velvet Hand's skill upon his handsome face.

In time he would return, and then, perhaps, there would be one card-sharp less in the town, or else the Cinnabar mine might need a new superintendent.

Del Colma was in a quandary; he knew not how to act. Velvet Hand had spoken the truth in regard to his interview with Blanche for the girl had shown him the diamond-ring and related how strangely she had recovered it.

But whither had Bertrand Redan gone and what did he seek? In the mountain caves, beneath the shadow of Shasta's mighty peak, he held council with the masked men of Captain Death's band and together they plotted the death of the daring Cinnabar agent.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FANDANGO.

ANTON VELARDE was his name, and "the City of Mexico Saloon" was the place that he kept.

A little yellow-skinned Mexican, evil of face and supple of conscience; no brawny desperado, and yet few men in the town of Cinnabar bearing a harder name.

Within the limits of the young metropolis of the Shasta valley there might be worse places than the den presided over by the Mexican; noisier, rougher-appearing saloons there certainly were, but when it came to mischief within the walls of "the City of Mexico," it meant death.

The place was saloon, gaming-hell and dance-house combined.

In the outer apartment a man could drink; in the next there were always six or eight beauties, more or less indebted to art for their charms, and there the light fantastic toe could be shaken; and the inner room of all was sacred to the god of chance, and the flush miner, hot from the mountain gulches, with his little buckskin bag of gold-dust, could freely risk it at almost any game from Spanish monte down to the rude chuck-a-luck board, so common to the south-western border.

And once a week—on Sunday night, too, to relate the exact truth—there was always a grand fandango held in the saloon; and so common had the habit grown among the miners of attending these wild orgies, that on Sunday evening in Cinnabar if one wished to find any prominent man, the chances were about ten to one that at some time in the evening, varying from nine to twelve, the party could be found, looking on at the "fun" so strongly indulged in at the Mexican saloon.

Two out of every three who visited the place took no part in the orgies, but were merely "lookers-on in Vienna."

It was the correct "thing" among the little circles into which the inhabitants of the town were naturally divided, to stroll down the street and take a look at the elephant on Sunday evening, when conversation flagged and topics of interest were scarce.

It was on the Sunday evening closing the week wherein the fray between the Cinnabar superintendent and Velvet Hand had occurred that we visit "the City of Mexico," and quite a crowd had assembled, as usual, in the Mexican saloon.

The fandango had commenced, and as was only common, a little group was gathered around the doorway of the dance-hall, watching the fun; a small number of players, too, were within the gaming-room, intent upon wooing the fickle goddess, Fortune.

Velarde, the proprietor of the place, ever on the alert, noticed that within the precincts devoted to the fickle dame, were two men who only made a pretense of playing, and ever and anon a third man would saunter into the room from the dance-hall, exchange a few words with the two, and then turn out again.

One of the three was known to the Mexican, and the superintendent of the Cinnabar mine, Bertrand Redan.

The face of the mining superintendent still bore visible marks of Velvet Hand's iron knuckles, and the oily Mexican, knowing the story of the meeting between the two men, quickly guessed that Redan was lying in wait for the Cinnabar sharp.

The two men with the superintendent were both utter strangers to the Mexican; they were big, burly fellows, and from their look Velarde judged that they were gentlemen untrammeled by any foolish ideas of right and wrong.

Now the Mexican bore the Cinnabar sharp no good will; one evening when Velvet Hand had strolled into the place he had been bantered to play; few men were there in the Shasta valley as expert at "short cards" as the tawny saloon-keeper, but when he encountered the pet of the Occidental he met his master.

Anton had never forgotten nor forgiven Velvet Hand, and therefore he was not at all sorry when he saw preparations on foot to double-bank—that is, assault with overwhelming force—the Cinnabar sharp.

Carelessly sauntering up to the superintendent, he saluted him. Redan, although annoyed that he had attracted the attention of the landlord, responded civilly.

Then Anton cast a rapid glance around him, saw that no one excepting Bertrand's companion was near, drew Redan a few paces away, and then came at once to business.

"You make some quarrel here, eh?" the Mexican said, speaking with a very perceptible accent.

"Oh, no," Redan replied, annoyed that his movements had attracted the attention of the lynx-eyed saloon-keeper.

"Oh, yes! you no fool me!" Anton cried, decidedly. "Both your friends, eh?"

And as he spoke the Mexican nodded to the stranger by Redan's side and to the other who had just re-entered the room, but who hesitated to approach his leader, perceiving that he was in company with the saloon-keeper.

"Yes," Bertrand saw that it was useless to attempt to deny the truth.

"And you wait for Velvet Hand, eh?"

"Oh, no, I'm not waiting for any one."

"But if Velvet Hand comes you will settle with him for those marks upon your face, eh?" questioned the Mexican, shrewdly.

"Well, what of it?"

"You have your friend watching for your man; when he comes you will receive warning—you will step out, and then, as he is the best shot in the town, he will kill you."

This manner of disposing of the affair did not agree with the superintendent's ideas at all.

"That remains to be seen," he replied, grimly. "We are three to one against him, and we won't give him much chance to use his weapon."

The Mexican shook his head.

"This man is very quick; you must take him by surprise to get the advantage; s'pose I tell you a way!"

"Why, what have you got against him?" asked the superintendent, rather astonished at this unexpected ally.

"He win one thousand dollars off me, carambo!" hissed Velarde, in a passion, his rage rising as he thought of the skillful manner in which the sharp had "flaxed" him.

"Oho! and you will help me, then, in the affair?"

"Yes, s'pose you quarrel—you shoot, all is fair; s'pose you no quarrel but shoot without; it is murder; look out! the vigilantes are sleeping now, but they will wake some time. I will show you a place where you can secrete yourself—take deadly aim at your man—kill him and no one know where the shot came from, or who fired it! How will that suit, eh?"

"Splendidly!" cried Redan; this cool proposal of bloody assassination suited him exactly.

"Does Velvet Hand know either one of your friends?"

Redan hesitated for a moment before he replied.

"Perhaps he might recognize them."

"And he knows that they are friends of yours?"

"No, but if he did recognize them it would be pretty apt to put him on his guard."

"Do not think that they will see him and he not see them," Anton cautioned. "He has the eye of a hawk. My plan is far the best."

The Mexican had drawn the superintendent to one side during this conversation so that Redan's companions could not overhear.

"Tell your friends to wait here until you return," the Mexican continued. "You are an expert pistol-shot!"

"Few better."

"Good! I'll put you within twenty feet of him!"

"The devil must be in it then if I miss him!"

"Oh, you cannot miss if you are a good shot. Instruct your companions and then follow me."

The superintendent did as he was bid. The Mexican then led the way to the back of the gaming-room. There was a small door there through which the two passed. The door led into a small room, fitted up as a bed-chamber. This was the private apartment of the Mexican. This room and the gambling apartment were coiled over, at the cross beams, but the dance-hall was open from the floor to the roof. Mounting upon a chair Velarde pushed open a trap door in the ceiling, and then resting his arms upon the beams of the open space easily pulled himself up into the loft above. Redan followed.

The two found themselves in a small loft which extended all over the gaming-room.

"Come—tread lightly," Velarde said.

The Mexican led the way to the wall at the further end of the loft which rose from the cross-beams to the roof. In the wall was a window about two feet square, covered with some thin, white mummy stuff, which at a distance could not be distinguished apart from the white-washed walls.

The window looked down into the dance-hall.
 "See, there is your man now," cried Velarde, pointing through the window.
 Sure enough Velvet Hand had just entered the dance hall.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE TRAP.

"You cannot miss him, eh?"
 "Well, I don't know," Redan replied, slowly. "It's rather a long shot and the flickering lights will tend to confuse my aim. I shan't get two shots, you know. If I miss him the first time he won't be apt to wait to let me have a second chance, and, suppose I do hit him, what is there to prevent the miners from discovering me up in this cubby-hole? the smoke of my pistol will be sure to betray me and they won't show me much mercy."

"You see how the room is lighted?" and the Mexican pointed to the rude chandelier suspended by a cord in the center of the saloon.

"Yes, by the chandelier."

"You see where the cord runs to the wall so that it can be lowered and raised?"

"Yes."

"Good! I will be by the cord—a sharp knife in my hand; the moment you fire I will cut the cord, down come the lights—all is dark—the crowd will swear, they will yell, rush out! Who knows who fired the shot or where it came from, eh?"

"An excellent plan, but unless he changes his position I am afraid that I will not be able to hit him."

"I can fix that, too!" the Mexican said, shrewdly. "There is a girl—she is fond of this Velvet Hand. I will send her to dance with him, and tell her to take a position on this side of the room."

"Ah, that will answer."

"Oh, I am as cunning as a fox!" the greaser cried, chuckling. "Do not fire until you see me or my bar-keeper with the candle on the rope of the chandelier. You see where it is fastened behind the bar?"

"Yes."

"Watch well and we will go to his funeral to-morrow!" and then, with another hideous chuckle, he strode away.

The Mexican proceeded straight to the ball-room, and as he passed through the groups of dancers he looked carefully around for the pert Mexican girl, Zimena.

It was the fashion for the females to come to these fandangoes muffled up to the eyes, masked or disguised in some way, thus carrying out the idea of a masked ball; but the figure of the girl he was in search of was so well known to the rascally saloon-keeper that he was generally able to detect her at a glance.

Zimena had evidently not arrived, for the Mexican was unable to discover her.

Proceeding behind the bar he accosted his second in command, a stout Mexican with about as ugly a face as could be found within the limit of the town.

The bar-keeper was sitting on the edge of an open window right behind the bar, regarding the dancers with a scowl.

"No Zimena to-night, eh, Pedro?" said the Mexican.

The bar-keeper was vainly trying to pay court to the willful waiting-maid.

"Oh, yes, she's here," he replied.

"She's not gracious to-night, eh?" The landlord guessed the reason of the Mexican's ill-temper.

"That gringo is here!" Pedro replied, with a scowl.

"And when he is here she has no eyes for any one else?"

"And he cares not two straws for her."

"You can't make a vain fool of a girl believe that there is any man in the world whom she can't get," the saloon-keeper observed, sagely.

"He takes no notice of her at all, and yet she is always throwing herself in his way."

"Ah, women always like men whom they have to run after." The Mexican was a philosopher.

"If this fellow was out of the way I think the jade would listen to me."

"You think so, eh?"

"Yes."

The Mexican glanced around; not a soul was within nearer than eight or ten feet, and all were very busily engaged watching the dancers.

"We will not be troubled with him much longer."

"Eh?" The bar-keeper looked astonished.

"He has enemies, and they will strike him soon."

"When—to-night?"

"Maybe."

The two rascals exchanged glances; both hated Velvet Hand, but neither one dared to openly quarrel with him.

"Where is Zimena?"

"Yonder, at the end of the room, with the black mask and the black gown trimmed with red; but what do you want with her?"

"As a decoy to engage the attentions of a certain party until the trap is ready to be sprung."

"Oh! they are not going to give him a chance, eh?"

"No chance at all. You get by the rope of the chandelier, unfasten it so that you can let it go at a moment's warning."

"How will I know?"

"The moment you hear the crack of a pistol."

"Ah, they will fire at him!" and the blood-thirsty Mexican fairly grinned at the idea.

"Yes, we will go to his funeral to-morrow." And with this cheerful observation the saloon-keeper moved away in search of the sprightly Mexican girl.

Velvet Hand, who had simply strolled into the place to pass the time away, was standing idly by the entrance gazing upon the dancers, when he felt a light touch upon his arm, and turning in some little astonishment, he beheld a female form, heavily cloaked and densely veiled.

"A word with you, sir," she said.

The sound of the sweet clear voice sent an electric thrill through every pulse of the cool sport, and yet Velvet Hand was not a man who cared to talk much with the masked women who attended these Mexican fandangoes.

"This way," he said, replying instantly, although his astonishment was great; and as he spoke he slipped the lady's arm within his own, and drew her off toward the side of the room where the benches for the accommodation of the tired dancers were placed.

Owing to the crowd this movement excited no attention.

One man only noticed it, and that man was the superintendent of the Cinnabar mine, Bertrand Redan.

From his place of concealment, with eyes alone for Velvet Hand, not a motion of the Cinnabar sharp escaped him, and great was his astonishment when he saw the woman accost him.

Despite the cloaked figure, despite the veiled face, Redan believed that he recognized the woman, and he set his teeth together in anger, while heavy curses, not loud, but deep, escaped from his lips.

"It cannot be possible, and yet it is!" he muttered, hot with rage. "I would not have believed that she could play so bold a part as to seek the fellow here in this den! What madness has taken possession of her! By heaven! it will be a glorious revenge to shoot him down right before her very eyes." And then the keen and calculating assassin noticed that the bar-keeper, in obedience to his orders, had undone the fastenings of the rope which adjusted the chandelier, and stood ready to bring total darkness upon the dance-hall the moment that the signal was given.

Eagerly then the concealed man waited, with murder in his heart, for a favorable opportunity to speed the deadly leaden ball home to the breast of the sport, who, all unconscious of danger, could not possibly suspect that death threatened him so nearly.

"Your life is in danger," the veiled woman said in low, earnest tones, as they paced along the floor. "Seek not to know who or what I am, but believe the warning I give."

Poor girl! She fancied that her disguise was so perfect that Velvet Hand's shrewd wits would be baffled in guessing who it was, and yet the evil eyes of the superintendent had penetrated her secret just from her figure and her walk.

"I am very much obliged for the warning, lady," Velvet Hand remarked, slowly, "and I trust that you will believe me when I say that I have no wish to pry into your identity; but can you not explain the manner of the danger, the quarter from whence it will come, and how soon I may expect it?"

"At any moment!" replied the girl, hurriedly. "Even at this present moment the pistol of the assassin may be leveled at your heart."

"Oh, I am to be assassinated?"

"Yes, here, in this room, at any moment, I suppose; and the sound of the pistol shot is to be the signal for the putting out of the lights, so that the assassins may escape after doing their deadly work, I presume."

CHAPTER XXVI.

DEFINING THE SITUATION.

"The sound of the pistol shot is to be the signal to extinguish the light, eh?" Velvet Hand repeated, slowly.

"Yes."

"And then, I presume, they intend to settle me?"

"Yes."

"Well, I shall have to alter the programme a little, for I am not quite ready to shuffle off my mortal coil yet, but I can't imagine from what quarter the danger comes, for, so far, to-night I haven't seen the face of a foe."

But just as he finished the sentence, his quick eyes, ever on the alert, caught sight of a frowzy head projected cautiously through the door-way which led from the dance-hall to the gaming saloon.

On the instant the cool gamester recognized the man to whom the head belonged. It was Buck of Angels!

Little doubt now in the mind of Velvet Hand as to the quarter from whence the danger threatened. Captain Deane and his road-agent band were near!

With Velvet Hand to think was to act.

"Do not be alarmed at anything that may happen!" he said quickly in the ear of his companion, and then with a careless movement his right hand was in the pocket of the loose sack-coat he wore; he elevated the skirt of the coat a little.

The hand in the pocket grasped a cocked Derringer pistol, small in size, but like all of that peculiar make, carrying an extremely heavy ball.

Then through the room rung the quick, sharp report of a pistol.

No need for the Mexican bar-keeper to obey the instructions which he had received and lower the chandelier at the sound of the pistol-shot, for the well-aimed ball of the velvet sharp cut the cord of the lighting apparatus and down with a thump came the rude contrivance.

The shock extinguished the lights and the apartment was in a second plunged into utter darkness.

"Carambol!" cried the Mexican in delight, "that settles my gentleman; he no more win a thousand dollars at my table!"

The saloon-keeper believed that the shot had been fired by the man whom he had placed in ambush, and he nothing doubted that at the moment Velvet Hand lay weltering in his gore.

As for Redan he was completely astonished at this sudden and unexpected turn of affairs. Mad with rage and jealousy he had taken deliberate aim at the figure of the man he hated and was just about to pull trigger when Velvet Hand's prompt action plunged the room in utter darkness.

A dance had just ended and the dancers were congregated about the bar when this sudden "dousing of the glim" occurred. One and all believed it to be accidental and some imagined that the report they had heard was produced by the sudden snapping of the chandelier rope.

"Keep your places! It will be all right in a moment!" one cool-headed fellow shouted.

And so they did, but a dozen matches were ignited in a second, the little flames shining like so many huge fireflies.

The Mexican had listened anxiously, expecting to hear the dying groans of the man he hated; but, not being gratified in this particular, he came to the conclusion that Velvet Hand had been killed outright by the superintendent's well-aimed ball.

Judge of the surprise of the bloodthirsty mongrel Spaniard then, when the lights were again lit, to find no trace of the sport. He rubbed his eyes, as if unwilling to believe that he had seen correctly; but there was no mistake about the matter—Velvet Hand was gone!

There were open windows in the wall behind where he was standing; wounded, perhaps he had struggled to one of the windows and fallen out.

Vain surmise! for upon examination the baffled Mexican could find no trace of the Cinnabar sharp, and still greater was his astonishment when, consulting the bar-keeper, he found that his assistant had had nothing to do with the fall of the chandelier.

Velvet Hand's sudden disappearance is easily explained. The moment the room was plunged in darkness, he drew the veiled woman gently to the nearest window, leaped through it, and then assisted her to reach the ground outside.

"Lady, you have done me a great service to-night," he said, as they walked away from the saloon; "I am deeply grateful and wish in some way to return the service."

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed, quickly, "that is not necessary. It was a bold, unwomanly step to enter such a place, but I could not resist the impulse which told me that it was my duty to save a fellow-creature from mortal danger."

"Lady, while I live I will never forget the service," he replied, with feeling.

"And now, good-night, sir," she said, evidently embarrassed, and halting irresolutely.

By this time they had got away from the immediate vicinity of the Mexican dance-house, and were in quite a lonely spot, secure from observation.

"Good-night."

Velvet Hand understood that she wished to retreat unobserved, and as he replied to her farewell salutation, he politely raised his hat.

"You will not, I trust, seek to discover who I am," she observed, nervously, and evidently much agitated.

"Miss, I will not attempt to deceive you," he replied, gently and kindly. "I know who you are, and I feel that it would be a sorry repayment for your kindness, if I permitted you to go away with the belief that you were a stranger to me. In Cinnabar City there are few women likely to be confounded with Blanche del Colma."

With a quick, impetuous motion the girl threw up her veil, thus revealing the glorious beauty of her face to the dark eyes of the sport.

"I am Blanche del Colma!" she cried, "and I will not attempt to deny it. You served me by returning the diamond I prize so highly, and now I have repaid the service. All I ask is that you will not reveal the secret of this night's adventure to any one."

"Most certainly not; you may rely upon my honor and my discretion."

"A foolish fancy, foolishly followed, has led me on to-night; I do not regret it, for it is always sweet to serve a fellow-creature."

"And I am right glad that it has happened as it has, although the events of this night interfere most materially with some cherished plans of mine."

The senorita looked astonished, and her great, dark eyes were turned inquiringly upon the speaker.

"A few words will explain," he continued. "All Cinnabar City knows me now as Dick Velvet, or as Velvet Hand, as I am more commonly termed, but there was a time when I bore another name—when I was something different from the mere adventurer that I now seem to be, floating carelessly upon the tide of fortune, the sport of every idle wind. Years ago I owned the Cinnabar mine; it was my property by right of discovery; from the wild red chiefs I wrested it and held it until men of my own race wrested it from me. I came back here determined to repossess myself of my property. I found your brother in possession. He had a mania for card-playing; I am an adept in handling the painted pasteboards, and I gratified his mad desire for play. I had an object in view; he was in possession of my property, and I was determined, by the aid of the cards, to regain every ounce of gold that he got out of the Cinnabar mine. So far my plan has succeeded. I have won from your brother over six thousand dollars, double the profit that he has en-

joyed from the mine; he is hopelessly involved; the property is mortgaged and will be sold under the hammer in a very short time unless he manages to raise a certain sum of money. There is not one chance out of a hundred that he can raise it. I see the way open to again enjoy my own, when, like a spirit from another world, your figure rises before me. You have risked that most precious jewel of womankind, a good name, to save my worthless life, and now must I repay the service by driving you forth into the world a beggar? What shall I do?"

"Wait; give me time for reflection and then I will answer you!" cried the girl, impetuously, convulsed by emotion, and then she hurried away, as if she feared to trust her tongue.

CHAPTER XXVII

A LAST STAKE.

OLD Father Time in his eternal flight stays not, no matter how humbly we pray or how earnestly we curse; and so, dating from the night when the strange interview between the haughty California girl, Blanche del Colma and the Velvet Hand had taken place, ten days had passed, ten days fraught with much consequence to some of the characters in our story.

And to no one of them more than to Fernando Del Colma, had the flight of time furnished greater matter for anxiety.

The mortgage on the Cinnabar property came due; Del Colma was unable to raise the amount necessary to meet it, although he had worked like a horse to procure the money. But, in mining parlance, the Cinnabar property was "a bad egg." Men shook their heads when asked to advance the sum and take the mine for security.

The story of the lode was too well known in the town. That lead was presided over by a demon who promised great stores of wealth, but who invariably ended by devouring the unlucky mortals who controlled the property.

"Don't you believe that there is gold in the lode?"

"Oh, yes," was the reply, unhesitatingly given by one and all; "but what's the use of the gold being there if it's going to cost more than it's worth to get it out?"

The story of Talbot's bloody adventures in connection with the mine, was still current in the town, although not a man who listened to the legend-like tale even dreamed that bold and hardy Injun Dick still walked the earth, and still kept watch and ward over his old-time treasure-house.

"Oh, no, sir," the acute and canny men of means replied, when asked to put up a few thousand dollars on the strike. "No Cinnabar lode for me; no, sir, no sugar in mine. That place has either killed or broke every man who ever had anything to do with it. It is an unlucky bit of property; 'bad medicine,' sir, as one of the heathen bucks would say. It would really be a benefit to the town if an earthquake should come along and shake five or six thousand tons of earth and rock right down on top of it; yes, sir, bury the Cinnabar lode so deep that pick ax and spade would never be able to dig it up again."

With such sentiments common to the solid men of the town, no wonder that Del Colma was unable to raise a cent on the security of the mine.

Payment being refused, the summary aid of the law was invoked; so rigidly had the papers been drawn that there was no chance for a delay. The court put the sheriff in possession of the property, and a day was set for a sale almost immediately.

After the legal process was executed and the strong arm of the law had wrested the property from the Californian, sulks and downcast Del Colma came in to his supper.

"Well?" Blanche questioned, inquiringly, although from the look upon his face she easily guessed that the worst had transpired.

"It is all over," he answered; "the mine is now in the hands of the sheriff, and will be sold at public auction the day after to-morrow."

"Then you have lost all that you have invested?"

"Yes; there is only one chance to save anything from the wreck," he observed, thoughtfully. "The mortgage amounts to ten thousand dollars; the interest and legal expenses will be a couple of thousand more—about twelve thousand all told. Already I have invested double that; in fact, the mine stands me in over thirty thousand dollars. It is good property—I don't care what people say about it. It is as rich a mine as there is in all northern California, and will pay splendidly just as soon as it gets in good working order. Now, to pay off the mortgage would cost twelve thousand dollars, but at the auction sale the chances are a hundred to one that the entire property will not fetch over five or six thousand dollars, so great is the feeling against the lode on the part of the money-men of the town—the fools believe that it always brings bad luck to whoever owns it. If I could raise five or six thousand dollars, I would buy the property in—buy it in your name, for the law holds me answerable for the difference between the amount the place brings at the sale and the sum due from me. Of course as long as I have nothing, my creditors can get nothing, but with the mine running—and I am certain that the ore we are getting out now will pay handsomely—I could soon pay off the debt."

"But five or six thousand dollars is a large sum," the girl observed. "Can you get the amount?"

Fernando drummed with his fingers upon the edge of the table, by the side of which he had seated himself.

"I can't borrow it," he observed, after quite a long pause. "Nobody will loan on the unlucky hole."

"Perhaps there may be some truth in the superstition; the mine has not brought good luck to us."

"One swallow does not make a summer," the brother retorted. "It is my evil fortune; the mine has had nothing to do with it."

"Perhaps not; but if you cannot borrow the money, then it is hopeless to think of still controlling the property."

"I don't know about that."

Blanche looked at her brother, inquiringly; it was plain that he had some plan in view.

"Do you not think that we ought to make some effort to retain the mine?" he continued.

"It seems a shame to lose so much," she replied.

"That ring upon your finger is worth five hundred dollars at the least," he said, pointing to the diamond, which has already played so prominent a part in our story.

"This ring?" and a burning blush swept rapidly over the beautiful face of the girl; but the tell-tale blush was gone in a moment, and Fernando, busy with his own thoughts, gazing intently upon the precious stone, did not notice it.

"Yes; if you are willing to risk the loss of the ring, I may be able to raise five or six thousand dollars."

"I do not understand," Blanche observed.

"And I cannot explain," he replied, a tinge of hauteur in his voice. "If you are willing to risk it, well and good; give it to me, and I will make the trial, but I cannot explain to you what I am going to do, or how I am going to do it. I know that there is a chance to raise the money, if you will give me the ring to work on. It is not possible that fortune will forever frown on me; the tide must turn sometime; it is a long lane that has no turning, they say. I am desperate now, and must play a bold game; Fortune is a fickle jade, and now at the eleventh hour she may choose to smile upon me."

Without a word Blanche took the ring from her finger, kissed it, passionately—two sweet memories were connected with the charming bauble—and then handed it to her brother.

The dark eyes of the Californian lighted up as his fingers grasped the ring.

"If fortune does not change, why, then, the sooner I am out of this evil world the better!" he exclaimed.

"While we live we may hope," exclaimed the girl.

Woman though she was, she was made of stouter stuff than the Californian.

Fernando rose, putting the ring upon his finger.

"Before midnight this little sparkler shall win back the mine for me!" he announced, with a glow of triumph on his face.

Already the gray mists of the night were rapidly descending. The Californian took up his hat.

"Will you not stay for supper?" Blanche asked.

"Oh, I have no appetite. Food will be repulsive to me until this suspense is settled." And then his eyes fell upon the long-necked wine-bottles upon the side-board; the sole remains of the famous vintage which had once reposed so snugly in the ancestral cellars of the Del Colma family.

"I am not hungry, but I thirst," he continued; and then he filled himself a generous glass of the rich wine, tossed it off at a draught, kissed the sweet forehead of the girl, and sallied forth.

Up and down through Cinnabar town went the Californian, and one man alone he sought—Velvet Hand!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DESPERATE CHANCE.

VELVET HAND was found at last; seated on a bowlder on the hill-side, he was gazing vacantly down upon the Cinnabar mine. It was the veteran Joe Bowers who directed the Californian to the right spot.

"Pard, methinks I savvy," he exclaimed, with all that dignity so peculiar to the bummer. "Oft in the still night, when slumber's chain holds the galeots of this hyer wicked world, hev I see'd that velvet-coated sharp a-sittin' on the hill-side, right above the Cinnabar strike, a-gazin', in meditation wrapped, down into the valley. He's a deep cuss, he is. He goes up thar' an' steadies his nerves, so that he kin flax the boys at poker when the midnight hour draws on. He's jest ole p'ison now, I tell yer."

Acting upon this advice, Del Colma climbed the hill-side, and, sure enough, he then found the man he sought.

The face of the sharp was clouded; it was with troubled eyes that he looked down upon the mining valley.

The sound of footsteps aroused him from his meditation, and, in some surprise, he looked up. Few feet ever trod the little trail up the hill-side.

"Good-evening," said the Californian, advancing.

"Good-evening," Velvet Hand replied, distantly, evidently not pleased at having his privacy intruded upon.

"I have been seeking you."

"Yes?"

The Californian seated himself close to the other.

"And not finding you in the town, I was directed here."

It was quite plain to Del Colma why Velvet Hand had selected this nook on the hill-side, sheltered by the spreading pines and the cone-like junipers, as a lounging place.

A short eighth of a mile away was the Cinnabar property, and from that spot one could command a full view of the mine and the buildings.

"One can command a fine view of the Cinnabar property from this point, I see."

"Yea."

Velvet Hand was strangely reserved.

"You know, I presume, that the Cinnabar property is in the hands of the sheriff?"

"I heard so."

"I owe about twelve thousand dollars on it which I am unable to pay."

"That is bad."

"And of the twelve thousand which I ought to have, you have got about six."

"Yes?"

Velvet Hand was not manifesting the slightest interest in the matter.

"Lost to you at cards," Del Colma continued.

"If a man will play, he must expect to lose sometimes," the sharp replied, in his cool way.

"I have lost always!" the Californian retorted, bitterly.

"I wouldn't play then if I were you."

"When I need your advice I will ask it!" Del Colma exclaimed, haughtily.

The lip of the sharp curled just a little, but he did not reply. Possibly he saw that the Californian was in a desperate mood and he forbore to provoke him to a quarrel.

"There is only one chance for me to save my property."

"Your property?" questioned Velvet Hand.

"Yes—the mine."

"Oh, yes, I see. Well, you are not the first man whom the Cinnabar mine has broke."

Was the cool and hardy sharp a believer, then, in the legend which gave to the golden lode the character of a destroying demon?

"If I had six thousand dollars I might be able to buy the mine in at the sheriff's sale."

"Yes; but six thousand dollars don't grow on every bush," Velvet Hand observed, tartly.

"You have managed to make that much out of me."

"Do you want me to give it back?" the Cinnabar man asked, sharply. "Are we a couple of boys playing marbles in fun, the winnings to be returned when the game ends?"

The Californian was nettled by the speech, and threw his head up proudly.

"I ask favors from no man!" he cried, "and least of all from you. I have sought you out to-night to challenge you to play. Before morning dawns I intend to win six thousand dollars from you."

"Well, if you do that, I sha'n't be able to buy the Cinnabar mine, to-morrow, at the sheriff's sale."

Del Colma started as if he had trodden upon a snake.

"You buy the Cinnabar mine!" he cried.

"Why not? It will be sold to the highest bidder, won't it? Why shouldn't I buy as well as anyone else? I am getting rather tired of being a gambler—a card-sharper, that is what gentlemen like yourself term me, although you are all eager enough to try to win the money that we gamblers risk. When I become the owner of the Cinnabar lode, I shall be a gentleman—a man of property; I can play cards, too, just the same as ever, but I will not be a gambler any longer. You will observe that there is a great deal of difference between the man who plays cards for amusement and the man who plays that he may live."

Del Colma winced at the sarcasm.

"Of course you are at liberty to buy the mine if you bid high enough."

"I'll give thirteen thousand dollars for it, if I can't get it cheaper."

The Californian looked astonished; he had no idea that Velvet Hand possessed such a sum.

"Oh, I mean it!" the sharp exclaimed.

"Will you play with me to-night?" Fernando asked, abruptly.

"No."

"You are afraid to give me a chance to win my money back!"

"I said once that I wouldn't play with you again."

"You owe me my revenge, and you are no man if you refuse to give it to me!" Del Colma cried, hotly. "See this diamond ring, my sister's jewel, given by her freely in this last extremity. It is all I have. It is worth five hundred dollars at the least, and I challenge you to put up that sum; take the ring, and then we will play."

"It's a bargain," cried Velvet Hand, abruptly. "I will buy the ring from you and give you a hundred for it, and you shall have the privilege of redeeming it at any time within a month."

"And you will play with me?" asked the Californian, eagerly.

"Yes; as long as you have a cent of money left," Velvet Hand replied, with cool irony.

The two men rose to their feet, and down the hill-side to the town they went; straight to the Occidental Hotel they proceeded, secured a room, laid in a stock of cards and candles, and immediately proceeded to work.

The game proceeded at first with varying fortunes, but as midnight approached luck deserted the Californian, and with the stroke of twelve he sat a haggard, penniless man.

The thousand dollars lay in a heap on Velvet Hand's side of the table.

He drew from his pocket two bags, one marked a thousand and the other five hundred, and placed them beside the heap of coin.

"Your sister is a charming girl; when I own the Cinnabar mine, I shall be a suitable match for any woman in California. I'll put up this twenty-five hundred dollars against your consent in writing to my wooing her, and take the chances of a single cut out of the cards."

In desperation the Californian consented. He cut the cards and displayed a jack. Velvet Hand cut and showed a queen. "These women always did favor me," he said, laughing.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AT SHERIFF'S SALE.

THE morning of the day appointed for the sale of the Cinnabar mine property came bright and beautiful.

Ten o'clock was the hour set for the sale, and quite a crowd had collected around and about the premises as the time drew nigh.

Prominent among the idlers who were plainly collected out of pure curiosity, and who had no idea of investing in the property, was Joe Bowers, who was the center of a little group, as he generally contrived to be.

"Oh, I tell yer wot it is, gentl'men, I know this hyer property from A to izzard!" he declaimed with lofty accent. "I knew it in the time when this hyer town was first started. I was one of the first pilgrims that hoofed it up this hyer valley, I was! Oh, them were lively times, you bet! I've seen more good old gold dust taken out of this hyer mine—why, gentl'men, talk 'bout yer Big Bonanzas, an' yer Consolidated Virginia, an' yer Mariposa grants—why, this hyer mine could knock the socks outen any of 'em! Oh, methinks, me noble bretheren, in me mind's eye, Horatio, I see them times ag'in!"

"Get out!" cried an irreverent bystander, "this hyer mine is a fraud, anyway! I reckon that I've heered all 'bout it. It's bustled every party that has took hold on it!"

"That's so, me noble dook; to the pint you talk, and straight, by jingol but it's a bully mine for all that! You don't understand; thar's a spell onto it!" and Mr. Bowers sunk his voice to a sort of mysterious whisper as he made this wonderful announcement.

"A what!" cried Yuba Bill, who was in the crowd.

"A spell—a charm, gentle William!" responded the bummer.

"Oh, give us a rest!" ejaculated the tall son of Yuba.

"It's a sure enuff fact!" cried Bowers. "Don't I know it, an' don't I say it; an' whar, oh, whar on this hyer footstool is the man wot says that I, Joe Bowers, kin lie! Thar's blood on this mine, feller-citizens! I see'd the fight when good men an' true went down like sheep with the rot; an' the bad spell that's on the place will never be worked off till Injun Dick Talbot comes to his own ag'in."

The name of Injun Dick was tolerably familiar to most of the crowd, and nearly all had heard some account of his connection with the settling of the town of Cinnabar; but some of the bystanders were ignorant of the man and his doings, and one of them, happening to ask for information in regard to Injun Dick, afforded the bummer, who was never so happy as when spinning some outrageous yarn, a chance to go into a long story about Injun Dick Talbot and his wonderful adventures.

Of course the veteran did not trouble himself in regard to facts, but he just "waded in," as Yuba would have remarked, and told one of the toughest yarns that mortal man ever listened to.

A few minutes before ten the sheriff, Shepard Blum, arrived upon the ground. Blum, as the readers of Injun Dick will probably remember, was formerly chief of police, but at the last election had succeeded in getting in as sheriff.

With Blum came the superintendent of the mine, Bertrand Redan.

The good folks of Cinnabar had been on the lookout ever since the affray between the Cinnabar superintendent and Velvet Hand for a first-class "shooting-match." The gossips of the town, after hearing of the discomfiture of Redan at the hands of the agile and strong-armed Velvet Hand, had looked to see Redan arm himself and assault the card-player on the first favorable occasion. But Redan had manifested no idea of doing anything of the sort, and when questioned in regard to the matter—some anxious souls could not restrain their curiosity—had simply said that he was a fool to allow himself to be drawn into a quarrel at all, and that, as far as he was concerned, he should pay no further attention to the matter.

This was "taking water" with a vengeance, Cinnabar was woefully disappointed, and the character of the superintendent suffered accordingly. As Joe Bowers had remarked, "Things wasn't now as they used to waa." Civilization had come and the glories of the old-time Cinnabar City were on the wane.

The hour of ten arrived.

Blum mounted a box, and unfolding a legal-looking paper proceeded to read the terms of the sale.

"The Cinnabar mine, machinery, buildings, tools, etc., to be sold to the highest bidder, ten per cent. of the purchase-money to be paid when the property was knocked down, forty per cent. more in thirty days, and the residue in one year from date."

And just as Blum commenced to read the terms of the auction, Velvet Hand, accompanied by Clint MacAlpine, the mayor of the town, joined the throng.

As the two came up and the velvet suit of the Cinnabar sharp was recognized, many in the crowd exchanged glances, and those individuals who were in the direct line between the new-comers and the Cinnabar superintendent began to edge out of the way. These considerate citizens were not anxious to interfere in any way with the settlement of the quarrel between the superintendent and the Cinnabar man, provided the pair were desirous of settling the matter by an attempt to "settle" each other.

But neither took the slightest notice of the other, much to the disappointment of a great many in the crowd.

"Now, genta, let's proceed right to business!" cried Blum, after he had finished reading the conditions of the sale. "'Tain't necessary for me to dilate upon this hyer mine. You all on you knows the Cinnabar lode, genta, like a book, and a richer mine don't exist on top of this hyer airth! It's in tip-top running order, as my friend hyer, Mr. Superintendent Redan, says, and I reckon he's posted on mining matters! Now, genta, as life is short and time is flyin', we'll pitch right in to onc't! How much am I offered for this hyer mine! On behalf of the owners of a mortgage ag'in' the property risin' twelve thousand shekels I'll bid seven thousand dollars!"

This announcement took the crowd by surprise, for one and all expected that the property would go dirt cheap. They had not anticipated this action upon the part of the wily gentleman of California street in that thriving burg of Frisco.

But these sharps had put considerable money into the Cinnabar property, and they intended to either have their money or the mine.

"Seven thousand dollars!" cried the auctioneer, "seven thousand—do I hear the eight?"

"Eight thousand!" exclaimed Mr. Superintendent Redan.

"Eight thousand dollars—eight thou—nine! Thank you, sir!" and the sheriff bowed, apparently to an individual on the outskirts of the crowd.

Everybody looked to see who had bid nine thousand, for no one had heard the bid; but the look was vain as far as information was concerned, for the men in the locality where the auctioneer had directed his bow were evidently as much amazed as the rest.

And then all at once it flashed upon the keen-witted ones of the crowd that the nine-thousand bidders were the Frisco sharps—the bulls and bears who roamed unchecked around the Bank of California.

"Nine thousand—who says ten?"

"Ten!"

It was the clear voice of the Velvet Hand that spoke this time, and Del Colma, standing gloomily by the door of the little cottage, dull-eyed and wan of face, started.

"Ten thousand—eleven!" another rise from the mortgagees.

"Now who says twelve?"

"Twelve thousand!"

A woman's voice this time, clear as the ring of a silver coin and sweet as the breathing of a lute.

It was Blanche del Colma in the cottage door.

"Twelve—twelve thousand—no advance,"—the Frisco genta were done. "Twelve thousand dollars, going, going—gone! Miss del Colma!"

Blanche had bought the mine!

CHAPTER XXX.

A DARING DEED.

A WOMAN buy the Cinnabar mine! a nine days' wonder! And that woman, too, the proud and haughty Californian girl.

"Miss Del Colma—twelve thousand dollars!" from lip to lip in the crowd the words passed, and every eye turned to gaze upon her, but she had discreetly withdrawn within the cottage.

Upon the face of the late superintendent of the mine, the cold-visaged Redan, sat a look of angry astonishment. The prize he had toiled so hard to gain had been wrested from his grasp right in the moment of apparent victory. Redan was fully prepared to pay ten thousand dollars for the mine, but to "rise" twelve was too much for him.

Another thoroughly astonished personage was Fernando del Colma. If the hoary head of old Shasta's peak had nodded and cried out, "Twelve thousand dollars for the Cinnabar lode!" he would not have been much more amazed.

As for the other party interested in the sale, the cool and quiet Velvet Hand, he did not seem in the least surprised, but took it as a matter of course.

"Why didn't you give thirteen thousand, old man?" Clint MacAlpine exclaimed; "thirteen would have corraled your elephant."

"Oh, it isn't manners to bid against a lady," the sharp replied with a laugh; "besides, twelve thousand sized my pile. When the blind is too much for my hand, I always 'stay out' of the game."

The sheriff approached Del Colma, who was still standing moodily by the door of the cottage, the little throng in the meantime rapidly dispersing.

"Ten per cent., you know, must be put up now," Blum said, supposing as a matter of course that the girl had bid the mine in on behalf of her brother.

"I know nothing about it," Del Colma answered.

"Well, I reckoned that you and the lady had fixed the matter between you," Blum exclaimed, astonished.

"I don't know anything about it," Del Colma repeated, "and what induced the girl to bid twelve thousand dollars when she hasn't got twelve thousand cents is an utter mystery to me."

The sheriff expressed the astonishment swelling within his manly bosom by a loud whistle.

"Blazes and Thomas!" he ejaculated, "here's a nice go! Have I got to sell the thing over ag'in, and the hull caboodle gone! Well, this is a sweet mess! Why, the gal must be crazy!"

"Perhaps you had better go in and see what she has to say about it," suggested Del Colma. "I for one am utterly bewildered by her action. Twelve thousand dollars! Why, I don't believe that she has got ten dollars in this world. I took all her money to put into the infernal mine, and like a

hungry demon it has swallowed all and now clamors for more."

"All right; I'll go in and see what she has to say about the thing. You'll excuse me, colonel, if I give vent to my feelings and say, darn these women critter! they are allers mixin' things up!" and thus having in a measure relieved his mind, the big sheriff marched into the house.

Like the majority of big men, Blum prided himself upon being a lady's man; and so, when he came into the room where Blanche sat, he removed his hat and bowed gallantly.

"Excuse my intruding, miss, but I'm the sheriff, and I've come to see about this hyer auction sale."

"Yes!" said the girl, smiling in her cold, stately way.

As Blum afterward said, in describing the interview, "she could jest hang herself alongside of any of them furrin queens an' sich, an' nary one of them would take the starch outen her."

"You bought the mine, miss—twelve thousand dollars."

"Yea, sir."

"I spoke to your brother about it."

"He knows nothing of my affairs," said the girl, with dignity.

"So he said, miss; well, there's ten per cent. to be paid to onc't."

"Ten per cent. of twelve thousand is twelve hundred dollars," Blanche observed.

"Yes, miss, I guess that is correct."

The worthy sheriff was not a man of figures, and he was getting out his book and pencil to ascertain the amount, when the girl spoke; but her prompt declaration carried conviction with it.

Blanche took a buckskin bag from her pocket and counted out in double-eagles the sum of twelve hundred dollars, a sight which made the eyes of the stout sheriff fairly blaze. Never before in all his life had he seen such an enticing display.

Sixty double-eagles, all arrayed in nice little piles.

"Count the money and give me a receipt, please," she said, in quite a business-like way.

The sheriff, much astonished, mechanically did as he was bid. This was the lady whom her own brother pronounced to be not worth twelve hundred cents.

"Correct?" Blanche asked.

"Quite correct," the sheriff replied, the count finished.

Then he wrote a receipt and handed it to the girl.

"Forty per cent. more in thirty days?" she asked.

"Yes, miss; and then the deed will be given, and the mortgage prepared."

"Very well; the money will be ready. Good-morning."

The sheriff understood that this was a polite hint that the interview was ended, so he gathered up the gold and withdrew with his load, no light one, as any man will find who attempts to walk off with sixty double-eagles.

Blum marched out of the house feeling duly elated, for he had feared that the whole "business" would have to be performed over again, and he had no wish to figure as the victim of a silly woman's whims.

"Now, whar is this durned old Californian who sed that this air beautiful heifer war clean bu'sted?" the sheriff ejaculated, as he strode out of the house. "Whar is he, so I kin shake the double-eagles at him and make him look sick—tryin' to fool the sheriff of this hyar durned old corral with sich a cock-and-bull story!"

But the Californian had departed. Gloomy and desperate, he had yielded to Redan's suggestion that he had better try some liquor to keep his courage up.

The wily superintendent was anxious to learn how Blanche had possibly contrived to raise so large a sum as twelve thousand dollars.

Del Colma could not afford him any information though. In fact, the Californian bluntly declared that he believed the girl had lost her wits, and that bidding for the mine was but the whim of a moment.

Anxious to learn the truth, Redan hurried away, as soon as he conveniently could, leaving Del Colma to continue the debauch which he had commenced.

It was not often that the Californian yielded to the demon of drink, but when he did, he drank until bereft of both sense and reason.

The superintendent hunted up the sheriff, and that worthy, in reply to the question as to whether the girl had made good the ten-per-cent. deposit, shook a handful of golden coins in the face of the questioner.

"Did she make it good?" he cried, exultantly; "well, now, she did, you bet! Ponied up jest like a little man, the solid stuff, an' I'm betting my head ag'in a lump of quartz that she's good for every cent!"

Amazed and disgusted, Redan strode away, his face overcast with a portentous frown.

The game was going most decidedly against him.

Del Colma came not home to his cottage that day; but as he was in the habit of remaining absent at times without warning, Blanche was not alarmed.

Night came and still no Fernando. Instructing Sanchez to keep watch for her brother, Blanche retired to rest, and about the midnight hour the sleepy hostler, dozing in his chair, was suddenly aroused by a most rude attack.

Who or what his assailants were he could not tell, for he was blindfolded, gagged and securely bound in an instant.

Then the midnight marauders ascended to the room where sleeping innocence reposed.

Bound, blindfolded and gagged, wrapped closely in a blanket, Blanche was borne from her apartment, placed upon the back of a horse, securely held by stout arms, and then, by a dark, circuitous route, was carried out of the town of Cinnabar.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A WILD ACCUSATION.

GREAT was Del Colma's astonishment, returning home at six o'clock in the morning, after sleeping off his debauch in a private room at the Occidental, to discover honest Sanchez, trussed neck and heels like a turkey ready for roasting, in the lower, outer apartment of the cottage.

The bonds removed, it was some time before the half-straggled Mexican could tell his story, and then it was a brief, broken, and most unsatisfactory one.

Seized by strong hands, during his sleepy watch for his master's return, he had been blindfolded, bound and gagged, and so expertly, that it was plainly evident the assailants were master-hands at such business! Some time after midnight the attack had occurred, for Sanchez stoutly protested that he had heard the time-piece strike the hour of twelve, and it was not long after that he had been roused from his slumber by the strong hands gripping him by the throat.

Unable to understand the reason of the attack, for the cottage contained no valuables calculated to attract such desperate birds of prey, Del Colma hurried up-stairs to question his sister.

He found the door of the apartment open, his sister's clothing scattered in confusion around the room, but no Blanche!

And then, all at once, the unhappy brother guessed the object of the midnight attack.

No gold or silver or precious stones had lured the night-hawks, but a single jewel that in the olden time would have purchased a king's ransom.

Blanche had been abducted!

But by whom?

To one man only the suspicions of the frenzied brother pointed.

Eagerly he tried the charges of his pistols, put fresh caps upon the nipples, and then, thrusting an ugly-looking, long Spanish knife into his girdle, he sallied out, blood in his eyes, murder in his heart.

Straight to the Occidental Hotel he went.

An all-night party were just emerging from the hotel, intent upon getting a breath of the pure, fresh air of the morning, so deeply laden with the balsamic odor of the pine groves, after their prolonged vigil at the card-table.

There was the mayor of Cinnabar, Clint MacAlpine; the gay and festive Billy King, the popular landlord of the Occidental; Leo Pollock, the principal store-keeper of Cinnabar, as wild a coon after business-hours as the best of the "boys;" Judge Bob Candy, the express agent; and last, though not least, the sharp, Velvet Hand.

Oh! it was a high-toned party! So any citizen of the town would have assured you; more manhood to the square-inch than you can often find, search the wide world over!

Straight up to Velvet Hand the Californian walked, and pulling a revolver from his pocket, ready cocked, fired straight at the handsome face of the Cinnabar sharp.

For once in his life Velvet Hand was taken entirely unawares, coming down the steps of the hotel, full of life and fun, for this "high-toned" party never met for the express purpose of winning each other's money; card-playing was but a secondary object. True, they played, but for small stakes, the bets limited to a quarter-ante, and wild betting frowned upon—it was the festive game of poker they enjoyed. A little wine was drank, but not enough to hurt any one of the party; they came together for the sake of fun, and with joke and song and story, they enjoyed the fleeting hours; and the sad, gray light of the early morning stealing in at the curtained windows saw quite a different set of faces from the haggard countenances that surround the professional gambling-tables when the aurora gilds the eastern skies.

As we have said, Velvet Hand was completely off his guard. He had not even noticed the Californian until the latter sprung forward and pulled the trigger of the revolver.

But the star of the sharp was surely in the ascendant that morning, for the hammer of the revolver fell without exploding the cap.

The over-caution of Del Colma had defeated his murderous attempt; in fresh-capping his weapon he had neglected to force the cap down upon the face of the nipple, and this neglect had resulted in a miss-fire.

No chance for the Californian to recock the revolver and make a fresh attempt, for in a second Velvet Hand caught him by the wrist, and adroitly twisting it, until Del Colma fairly groaned with pain, forced him to drop the weapon. And at the same time, too, Clint MacAlpine and Leo Pollock seized the infuriated brother in their strong arms.

Del Colma was instantly recognized.

"Good heavens! Del Colma, are you mad?" MacAlpine cried.

"Let me go!" the Californian exclaimed, hoarsely; "this man has wronged me almost beyond belief. Let me go, I say! It is his life or mine!"

"Let him go, gentlemen, if he will have it!" Velvet Hand said in his cool way. "As I am a living man I never wronged him in any way, shape or manner, but if he wants satisfaction, I'm not the man to cry nay to him! All I've got to say is, that I want a fair chance for my life, and if he's insured, I'll give his heirs a chance to make a stake out of the company."

"No, no!" cried MacAlpine quickly; "this sort of thing has gone quite far enough! Why, Del Colma, I took you to be a man and not a cowardly assassin. I don't know how you manage things where you came from, in Lower California, but up here in the Shasta region, we call a man who pulls a pistol or draws a

knife upon another without giving him fair warning, a damned coward!"

Del Colma's face first grew red and then pale as he listened to this disgraceful accusation.

"Oh, I am mad, I know it!" he cried wildly. "But you do not know how this man has wronged me; and I am as a child in his hands in a fair fight!"

A frank confession, certainly!

"Why, Velvet Hand, what have you done to him?" Judge Candy asked.

"Nothing at all, except play cards with him," the sharp replied, promptly.

"Oh, it is not that, gentlemen!" the Californian exclaimed, quickly. "He has abducted my sister!"

There was a general exclamation of astonishment at this charge.

"Yes, gentlemen," Del Colma continued, "this very night—in his excitement he forgot that another day had dawned—"this villain, with armed ruffians, broke into my house, bound, blindfolded and gagged my servant, and then carried off my sister Blanche! Just after midnight the deed was done, and am I not justified in killing such a wretch?"

"Oh, nonsense!" Olin MacAlpine said. "I can prove a clear alibi for Velvet Hand! I met him at the auction sale this morning, and he hasn't been out of my sight five minutes since that time up to the present moment!"

"We can all bear witness that Velvet Hand has been with us in a room in the Occidental ever since nine o'clock last evening!" Judge Candy declared.

The head of the Californian drooped; in his blind, unreasoning way he had instantly fixed upon Velvet Hand as the author of the outrage without a particle of evidence to connect him with it in any way, except that he believed that the sharp desired the girl.

"Gentlemen, I will swear to you, by any oaths that a man should hold sacred, that I know absolutely nothing in regard to this sad affair," Velvet Hand said, impressively, and there was not one in the circle, not even the half-crazy Californian, who did not believe he spoke the truth. "But I have an idea who is the author of the outrage, and I'll have the girl back again within a week if she be living, or lose my life in the attempt."

"I'm with you!" MacAlpine cried.

"Count me in!" exclaimed Candy.

"And your humble servant, also," added Pollock.

"I'm your mutton with the wool on!" the ever-impressible Billy King yelled.

"Thank you, gentlemen, but one man alone can aid me at present; my old Indian ally, Mud-turtle. As luck has it, he is at my little rancho at the upper end of the town. Within two days expect to hear from me."

And then Velvet Hand hurried away.

CHAPTER XXXII

A FEARFUL RETRIBUTION.

ONCE clear of the town of Cinnabar, the abductors of the unfortunate Blanche—there were three of them, all closely disguised in black cloaks and masks—rode into the trail leading up the Shasta stream.

One look at the persons of the outlaws, and it is easy to recognize Captain Death and his road-agents.

Straight onward they pushed, following the trail closely. They left the river just at the commencement of the McCloud Canyon, and circled around the rocky wall, passed the junction of the Angel's Bar trail with the main road, and then plunged into the well-wooded wilderness, sweeping from the crest of the McCloud Canyon to the westward.

Captain Death rode on ahead, the peerless form of the abducted girl in his strong arms, while close behind him came the two road-agents.

"Not for the cave to-night, eh?" questioned the worthy, who had called himself Buck of Angel's.

"No," replied the other, the evil-faced Joe Smith.

"A new hiding-place?"

"You bet!"

"The captain's head is level?"

"Oh, you can go rocks on that!" replied the other.

"The cave is played out now; no good in the cave since that velvet chap slipped through our fingers as sleek as an eel," the man from Angel's declared.

"Where are we bound, I wonder?"

"Blest if I know! The captain is a close-mouthed chap; he don't let nothin' out."

"What's the idee of takin' the gal away?"

"Make her folks come down with a big pile to get her again!"

"That's a bully idea!" thought Smith.

"Oh, yes; the captain has got a head on his shoulders."

"Sposen they don't come down with the dust quickly?"

"The captain will cut off one of her pretty ears and nail it up in the streets of Cinnabar, as a gentle reminder to her folks that he is in a hurry," the ruffian replied.

"Ah, that will fetch 'em!"

The party turned into the little open defile above the McCloud Canyon, through which ran the water-course, evidently the cause of the canyon's formation.

The moon, a round, bright ball, still high in the heavens, was shining brightly, so that the defile was almost as light as by day.

Captain Death reined in his steed, and his followers did likewise.

The road-agent leader cast a searching glance around him, and then, placing his fingers in his mouth, whistled shrilly.

His followers, astonished at the action, looked eagerly around them, anxious to observe the result of the signal. And totally astounded were they when from a hidden covert amid the rocks, like the lair of the wild beast, a painted, feather-ornamented chief rose to sight.

In a trice the road-agents had their revolvers in their hands. They feared that they had ridden into an Indian ambuscade, but quickly and sternly Captain Death allayed their apprehensions.

"Put up your weapons, you fools!" he cried. "The chief is an ally—a friend!"

"Ugh! chief—white man's friend all time!" and the warrior slapped his brawny, naked breast with his huge paw.

"Where are your warriors to take the girl?" demanded the road-agent.

"Here—ready! Come!" replied the Indian; and in obedience to the chief's command four stout warriors, bearing a buffalo-robe between them, advanced from their hiding-places among the bushes.

The buffalo-robe had stout saplings fastened along two sides, so that it formed a rude sort of a litter.

Into this receptacle Blanche was deposited, still wrapped securely in her blanket, and still tightly bound.

"All is understood, chief?" Captain Death questioned.

"Yes, me thinks so."

"You are to keep the girl safely until I come for her, and you must be careful that no knowledge that the girl is with you reaches any of the whites."

"Me be careful."

"Because if it was found out that the girl was concealed among your mountains there would be a swarm of white men up here after her."

The Indian drew himself up proudly and smacked his chest again with true savage dignity.

"Not all the white men who dig in the mud can drive the red chiefs from the hills of their fathers!" he cried.

"Ah, just stick to that and if they do come give them a warm reception."

"The red-men can either fight like the mountain lion or play at hide-and-seek in the woods like the fox."

"And when you deliver the girl safely into my hands, I will give you twenty-five rifles—as good guns as any that the white men have."

"Good; Injun want long gun—shoot far."

"Oh, you shall have them; the best the market affords."

"Injun glad that his white brother is generous."

"I'll be as good as my word; keep faith with me and you will have no cause to repent it!"

"Injun always keep faith—good Injun—no bad hearts in the tribe," replied the brave with, stolid dignity.

The road-agent leader glanced upward at the moon, now fast waning.

"Morning will soon be here and we've got a long ride before us. In so many days," and Captain Death held up five fingers, "I will meet you here again."

The savage gravely displayed five fingers and nodded.

"You understand?"

"Yes, chief know."

"And I'll bring a rifle with me as a sample of the rest."

"It is good!"

Perfectly plain now to the two road-agents was the course which the bold Captain Death had followed. He had continued to ally himself with the Indians, and so had provided a safe retreat to place the girl, secure from all danger of discovery.

But to the mind of the suspicious road-agents it was like playing with edged tools to have any dealings with these uncertain, tricky red-men, and right glad were they, therefore, when Captain Death bade the red wolf good-by and gave the signal to ride on.

The red-man gravely said, "How," after the stolid fashion of his race; then Captain Death and his band rode away down the defile.

Fifty paces the three whites had gone, their figures dark against the pale moonlight, when the old savage raised his hand high above his head.

A signal it was—a signal for blood and slaughter, for on the instant, a whistling arrow hurtled forth from almost every tree and bush on the sides of the defile.

Down went the three road-agents, transfixed with the keen-pointed, barbed shafts.

Writhing in the terrible agonies of death upon rocky, sterile soil, lay the outlaws, a dozen arrows in each breast.

And this was the way that the old red butcher Koo-choo, the McCloud chief, kept faith with the white man.

A few minutes and the death struggles were over; cold and rigid in the moonlight, with rigid, convulsed faces lay the dreaded Captain Death and his two right-hand men.

The Indian had avenged the plunder of many a hapless settler.

And now what earthly power could tear Blanche from the iron grip of the red McCloud?

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE WATER-BIRD'S DEVICE.

HIGH up amid the lava rocks, right under the shadows of great Shasta's peak, was the chief village of the McClouds.

Leaving a detachment to strip the slaughtered whites of their arms and clothing, the old chief, with the rest of his band, took up the line of march for the McCloud village.

Perched among the rocks like an eagle's nest, it was no idle boast of the old chieftain when he asserted that he laughed at the power of the white man.

Through the green mountain's gorge ran a limpid stream. By the borders of the water-course the ponies of the tribe found excellent pasture. The woods around abounded in game, the streams in fish. It was, in truth, a very silvan paradise!

Above and below the little valley the gorge contracted. A sentinel posted below the valley could easily detect the approach of a foe in sufficient time to allow all the non-fighting members of the village to take to the hills; and, protected by the natural fortifications, the rocky ramparts, rising in regular successive lines, the red warriors could hope to make a stubborn resistance against a force double their own in number.

At the upper end of the valley the tent—whickee-up—tepee—or wigwam, as the skin-covered habitations of the wild sons of the desert and the wood are variously called—of the old chief was situated.

It was a larger habitation than any other lodge in the village, and immediately behind it was another wigwam, communicating with the first by means of a skin door, but much smaller in size.

The captive girl was carried directly to the inner wigwam, placed upon the ground, still in the litter, and then the sturdy red braves, who had acted as beasts of burden, withdrew, and in their place came the soft-eyed, gentle-voiced Indian maid, Hula-haha, the Water-bird.

With kindly hands she unbound the lashings which confined the limbs of the white maiden, removed the bandages from around her head, and allowed her to once more breathe the free air and enjoy the blessing of her eyesight.

Nearly stifled had Blanche been by the rude muffler, and her limbs were sore from their long confinement.

The interior of the lodge was quite dark, for the cold, gray light of the morning, stealing now so swiftly over the eastern hills, had not yet penetrated to the interior of the Indian wigwam.

"Oh, Virgin Mother! where am I?" cried Blanche in terror, upon recovering the use of her voice, and vainly endeavoring to use her eyes, which, keen as they were, could not penetrate the darkness which surrounded her.

"In the village of the red McClouds, by great Shasta's peak," replied the Indian girl.

"And you, who are you that speak to me? Your voice is familiar!"

"Hula-haha, the Water-bird, the daughter of Koo-choo, the Hog, the great chief of the McClouds. If the white bird remembers, the McCloud girl came to see what she was like, once, under the cover of the night, in the great white village."

And then back to the mind of Blanche came the remembrance of her interview with the girl.

"And is it you who caused me to be brought here?" she naturally asked.

"Oh, no," answered the Water-bird, gravely. "The daughter of the McClouds would not harm a single hair of your head, for are you not the beloved squaw of the great white chief?"

In truth, this savage maiden was a noble woman, despite the fact that she was but a mountain wild-flower that had grown to womanhood with as little training as the free pines on the sides of Shasta's snow-crowned peak.

"And why was I brought here, then?"

The Indian girl evaded the question; she knew, only too well, why the old chief had so gladly embraced the opportunity to get the white girl into his clutches, but she shrunk from telling the terrible truth.

"Bad white men carried my sister from her big lodge down the river where the gold diggers live, and they paid the red-man to receive my sister and keep her safe for them."

"And these white men are to come for me, then?" asked Blanche, unconsciously, her brain in a whirl at this strange story.

"No, the white men are dead."

"Dead!"

"The warriors of the McCloud killed them; my sister is avenged for the wrong they did her."

Blanche shuddered; terrible thoughts were in her mind. The red chiefs had evidently leagued with the white men who had committed this fearful assault upon her, and then, when they had fairly lured the whites into their hands, had ruthlessly slaughtered them. What fate was she reserved for? What mercy could she expect at the hands of these blood-stained savages.

"Oh, you are a woman like myself!" Blanche cried, imploringly; "can you not aid me to escape from this terrible peril?"

"I cannot," the Indian girl replied, sadly.

"To what terrible fate am I doomed?" the hapless girl cried in agony.

The heart of the red maiden was touched by the piteous cry.

"Let my sister listen," she said, sinking her voice to a whisper, evidently afraid lest she should be overheard; "when the great white chief, the Velvet Hand, hears that his singing-bird is gone, he will know where to look for her, for he knows the plans of the red McClouds. He will come to the McCloud village. The Water-bird will be on the watch; she will see the chief and tell him all; then he will come and take the white bird away, for he is a great warrior and the McClouds are afraid of him."

The Indian maid spoke confidently, and yet her words afforded but little consolation to the aching heart of the Californian girl.

What could a single man, no matter how brave and skilled he might be, achieve with a whole village of Indian warriors engaged against him? The thought was madness. The hardy

Cinnabar man would but lose his own life in endeavoring to rescue her.

"Oh, no, do not tell him that I am here unless he comes with a force strong enough to overpower the Indians!" she exclaimed; "single-handed, he would but be lured to his destruction!"

The light of the morning had now penetrated into the lodge, so that the two girls could plainly see each other.

The Water-bird shook her head; it was plain that she had much more faith in the skill and prowess of the Velvet Hand than the Californian maiden, but then Blanche knew nothing of the past career of the man; was totally ignorant of the wild and daring deeds which had made the white chief of the Shasta tribe a very demigod to the simple red-men of the mountain land.

"The great red chief will come soon," said the red maid, with a glance at the scanty costume of the captive; "will my sister wear the Indian garb while she dwells in the McCloud village?"

Right gladly Blanche accepted the offer, and soon she was in dress a very daughter of the McClouds. With her jet-black hair and dark skin she did not look unlike an Indian girl when attired in the forest garb.

And then the Indian maid prepared a rude breakfast, of which the captive ate heartily; she was young, strong, and nature craved food.

The meal dispatched, the Water-bird withdrew, promising to return soon.

Two, three, four hours passed away, and the sun was high in the heavens, when Blanche heard a sturdy step in the outer wigwam; then the skin door was abruptly pushed aside, and an old, brawny chieftain stalked into the apartment, and with his little, glittering black eyes leered covetously at the helpless captive.

It was Koo-choo, the Hog!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A FATE WORSE THAN DEATH.

THE heart of the Californian girl sunk within her as she looked upon the ugly, greasy chieftain.

No man in his right mind could possibly decide that the old McCloud warrior had any pretensions to good looks, and not one woman out of ten thousand, white or red, but would have declared him to be positively hideous.

The chief had prepared himself for the occasion too; he had adorned his face with fresh vermillion, had donned his handsomest attire, and stood before the maiden he wished to captivate, proud in his regal magnificence, the greatest mountain chief of them all!

"How?" said the old warrior, opening the conversation after the approved fashion common to the frontier.

Blanche bowed her head in salutation, fixing her brilliant black eyes full upon the ugly face of the old savage, as if expecting to read her fate there.

"Let the white bird not tremble," continued the chief; "here she is as safe as the mountain eagle in the sky!"

What mockery! The bird of Jove bore himself on free wings, while she was a helpless prisoner—a captive song-bird.

"The bad white men, who stole the pale flower from her home and people, fell by the hands of the red warriors in the mountain gulch. Let the white bird take heart; her foes are dead, and their skulls hang in the smoke of the McCloud wigwams."

"And you will send me back to my people!" the girl questioned, eagerly. "They will reward you well, and say that you are a true friend to the white men."

The old red chief drew himself up proudly.

"Koo-choo, the Hog, is like the mountain lion, he is king over the land of Shasta; he is no friend to the false white men who dig in the earth like the beaver; he is their foe, and when they come up the river beyond the McCloud canyon, he will take a stick and drive them back. The red chiefs are tired of the white man; soon the Modocs will raise the war-shout and all the painted braves of Northern California will join in the cry; we'll drive the white man back to his foot-hills, where he can dig in the dirt as much as he pleases!"

Hope sunk in Blanche's breast as she listened to this bragging brute.

"No go back to the big lodges of the pale-face," the old warrior continued; "stay here with the red-men. Koo-choo, the Hog, is a great warrior; no red chief in the North dare dispute his power; very great chief—three squaws, Injun squaws, old, ugly," and here the painted beast made a grimace, "but work heap. The chief wants a white squaw, young, tender; the white bird will do; let her say that she will come and dwell in the lodge of the great McCloud chief, and she shall be as a queen over his nation."

This was a fate far worse even than death to the beautiful, high-spirited Californian girl. The new-slave of this heathen monster, whose hands were red with the blood of helpless victims; whose soul was charged with a thousand crimes;—oh, the most horrid death that human ingenuity could possibly invent would be bliss indeed compared to such pollution as association with him.

But she was a helpless captive, far from home and friends, in the almost inaccessible mountains tributary to great Shasta; what possible chance was there for her to escape from the dreadful fate so closely impending?

With gloating eyes the old red wolf looked upon her; noted the beauty of her face, the matchless perfection of her well-rounded

THE END.

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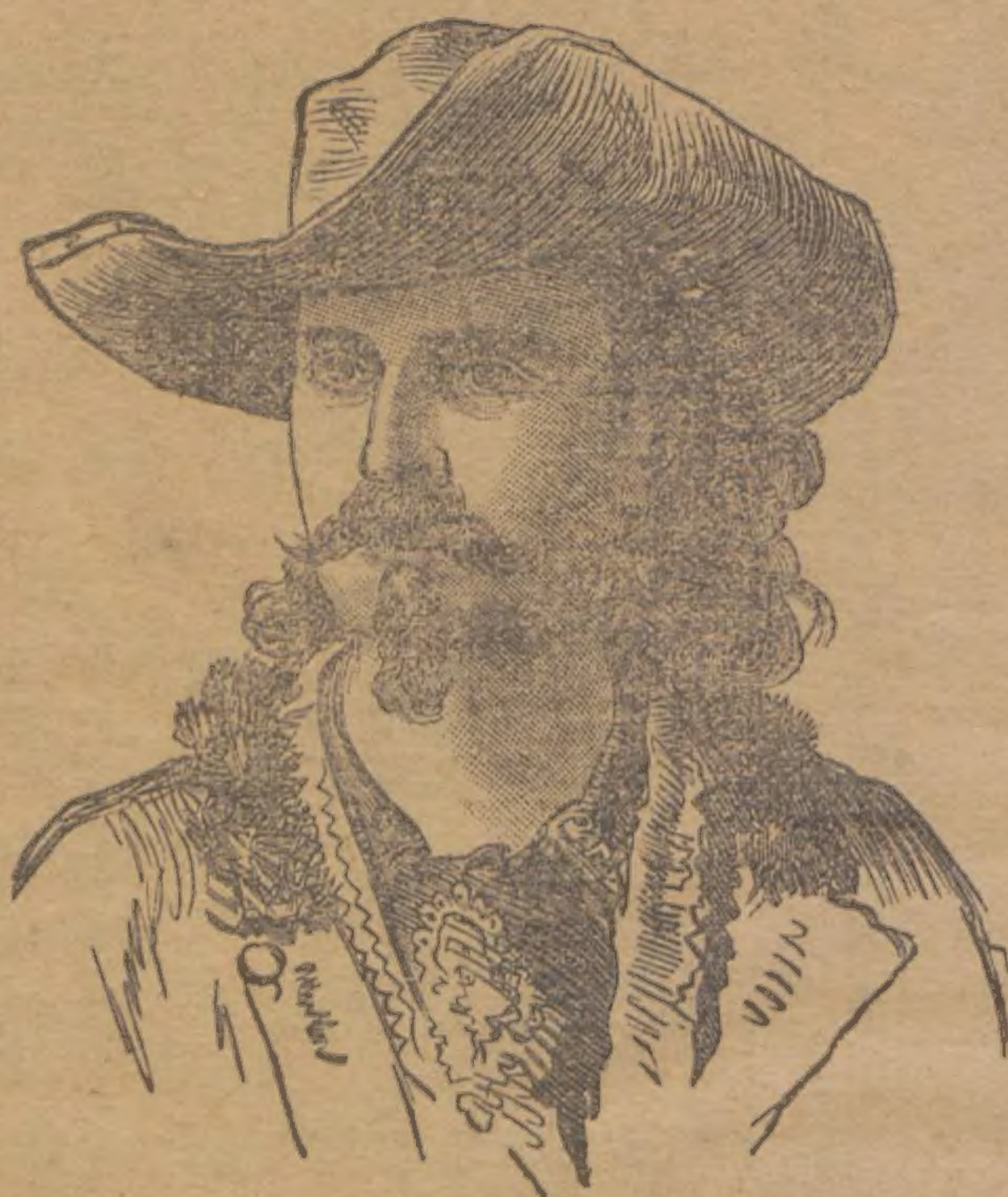
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